JOURNAL OF WORLD-SYSTEMS RESEARCH

ISSN: 1076-156X | Vol. 25 Issue 2 | DOI 10.5195/JWSR.2019.935 | jwsr.pitt.edu

# Book Review

***Dust Bowls of Empire: Imperialism, Environmental Politics, and the Injustice of 'Green' Capitalism.*** **Hannah Holleman.** 2018. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 256 pages, ISBN 978-0-3002-3020-8. Cloth ($35.00)

**Reviewed by Md Belal Hossain**
*University of Tennessee*
**mhossa13@vols.utk.edu**

Hannah Holleman's critical historical reinterpretation of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s rejects dominant narratives that portray the Dust Bowl as a mere function of climatic conditions; it was, rather, a human-made disaster. White settlers, who regarded indigenous ways of life as having lower inherent value, introduced capitalist-industrial agriculture, which destroyed ancient grasslands and regional species and was the main social driver of this catastrophe on the American Great Plains. White settlers' racist and imperialist treatment of marginalized people and of the planet, she argues, is a general trans-historical pattern of capitalist development in world history, of which the Dust Bowl is but one regional manifestation. Global "Dust-bowlification" (2) is pervasive today, especially in the extreme form of global climate change. Moreover, the solutions to climate change that are being proposed by modern institutions leaves the underlying causes of this pattern intact. Holleman argues that no sustainable solution is possible without a radical restructuring of the modern capitalist world-system.

Holleman points out that reproduction of Dust Bowl-like conditions has become more prolific in the twenty-first century than the previous century due to historically unprecedented erosion of the world's topsoil and disruption of water cycles and energy repositories. These ecological extremes are accompanied by extreme political and economic inequality and social misery. The loss of soil, water, and energy beyond their natural rates of recovery is threatening the existence

of human populations, as well as other species and entire ecological systems. A significant part of the world, including parts of developed countries, are already under severe threat of drought, while oil- and energy-related crises disproportionately harm vulnerable communities and social groups. This subjugation of nature and people has been made possible by industrial agriculture for private profit and advances in science and technology. Holleman argues that knowledge about these Dust Bowl-like conditions is available to policy makers today, as was also true in the 1930s. However, "extreme politics" (18), which Holleman defines as the reciprocal cooperation between government and industry that produces extreme ecological conditions, continues to protect the interests of private producers, preventing any serious efforts to prevent future dust bowls.

Holleman critiques recent studies by historians and geographers that portray the Dust Bowl as a major historical drought and thereby a natural disaster, distracting attention from the root causes of the problem. Even studies that have documented the Dust Bowl as a human-made disaster have paid insufficient attention to broader social drivers. Holleman argues that colonialist agricultural policies (e.g., cash crop agriculture and use of advanced agricultural technologies) was imposed upon indigenous lands not adapted to the mechanized systems introduced by white settlers, resulting in the loss of vegetation and exposure of topsoil to wind and water. The resulting soil erosion in North America was facilitated by a government supportive of westward expansion through legislation and policies conducive to colonial agricultural exploitation.

Putting the Dust Bowl into a global frame, Holleman argues that socio-ecologically destructive policies must be understood in the context of the broader history of colonialism and imperialism, which have given rise to soil erosion elsewhere. European colonizers and imperialists across Asia, Africa and America brought new lands under plow and forced local farmers to produce export crops and raw materials to meet the demands of urban industrial centers, undermining local conditions and the well-being of communities whose lands were invaded. This socio-ecological destruction continues to characterize the world today in that capital and agricultural commodities are transferred from underdeveloped to wealthier regions, a process known as 'ecologically unequal exchange.' Whether in the colonial or post-colonial period, the unequal exchange of resources has been legitimated by an ideology that asserted the natural superiority of the colonizers. Thus, the emergent racist worldview of white supremacy provided an ideological weapon for this imperial and capitalist project, justifying the subjugation of land and people in what Holleman terms a "racialized division of humanity" (56). White men, to date, have dominated the world, making the colonial-imperial process not only racialized but also gendered. Nowhere is this clearer than in the New Deal treatment of the indigenous communities during the 1930s, when Indians as well as Blacks and Latinos were systematically deprived of many opportunities created by Roosevelt's reform policies.

Capitalism is inherently contradictory both socially and ecologically. Externalizing the costs of production such as ecological damage, shifting its burden to poorer communities, and using technology to delay its effects are characteristic of the social metabolic order under capitalism that constantly produces ecological rifts. Reform efforts, including the New Deal programs that were devised to provide solutions to the Dust Bowl, have kept the social order intact, but proven

inadequate to redress social and ecological injustice. Holleman explains that current proposals for a 'Green New Deal' will reproduce both the ideals and the continuing imperialism and ecological crises of the first New Deal. Mainstream environmentalists continue to promote the idea that political will is needed to increase scientific knowledge and create effective technological change to overcome environmental problems. What they overlook is the fact that the New Deal did not threaten the status quo interests of industrial and political elites, but was employed to "ameliorate some of the worst symptoms of the social order and get the economy back on track" (129). The Dust Bowl, as presented in this book, is a historical case that links together the many disasters continuously reproduced by capitalist development within the common reference frame of Dust-bowlification. Solutions to ecological crisis today, therefore, cannot rely on the illusion of technological fixes, but must recognize the root cause of the crisis.

Although ideas associated with unequal exchange relations in the world-system are present in Holleman's analysis, no explicit reference is made to the world-systems perspective, nor to scholars of this tradition who have contributed significantly to the understanding of ecological crises. Holleman's work is largely compatible with world-systems analysis, but her argument about socio-ecological injustice would have been strengthened by addressing the global division of labor as fully as the gendered and racialized divisions she discusses. The value of this book, however, is unquestionable. Its interdisciplinary nature makes it instructive for national and international policy makers and experts in the tradition of socio-ecological synthesis– if they take the time to digest it. Those interested in long-term solutions to environmental hazards should not ignore this book. Graduate seminars in the social and environmental sciences, as well as environmental justice activists, will benefit greatly from revisiting the Dust Bowl as both history and omen.