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Theoretical Visionary: John Bellamy Foster and Capitalist Crisis in an Age of AI, Militarism, and Ecological Rift

Michael C. Dreiling

Abstract

John Bellamy Foster is best known for reconstructing Marx's ecology and developing the theory of metabolic rift. Yet his ecological writings form part of a wider theory of capitalist crisis rooted in the Monopoly Capital tradition. This article interprets Foster's contributions to crisis theory through four interlocking moments: monopoly and stagnation; financialization; imperialism and militarism; and ecological rift. Reflecting on Foster's recent work on AI fetishism, the paper illustrates the applicability of these four moments in the contemporary AI boom, the political ascent of Big Tech oligarchs, and expanded U.S. militarism to illuminate the continuing power of this synthesis. These developments do not signal the transcendence of stagnation by a technologically revitalized capitalism. They represent concentrated and contradictory outlets for surplus, joining productive investment to speculative valuation, private rents, state power, and imperial strategy. The material expansion of digital infrastructure also intensifies conflicts over electricity, water, land, noise, public subsidies, and democratic authority. Foster's distinctive achievement is to show why economic, imperial, political, and ecological crises are best understood as differentiated expressions of a historically specific system of monopoly-finance capital.

Keywords: John Bellamy Foster; monopoly capital; stagnation; financialization; artificial intelligence; militarism; metabolic rift

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Note: This paper began as a talk that I prepared for a mini-conference on *Political-Economy, Imperialism, and Ecological Crisis*, honoring John Bellamy Foster at the University of Oregon, May 28, 2026. Direct all correspondence to: dreiling@uoregon.edu

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Introduction

John Bellamy Foster is widely recognized as the scholar who rendered visible the *ecological* Marx, established metabolic rift as a foundational concept in environmental sociology, and traced a long tradition of socialist ecology from Marx and Engels through twentieth-century science and materialism. But his contribution reaches further. Across four decades, he has developed an integrated account of crisis in an age of monopoly-finance, a theoretical framework that locates the sources of crisis in monopoly stagnation, financialization, imperialism & militarism, class power and ecological breakdown, all while remaining attuned to the role of crisis in triggering emancipatory struggles.[1]

My own route into socialist critique of capitalist crisis was not primarily through Marxist political economy. It came through class analysis, social movements, and the study of global trade, corporate networks, and ecological degradation. That route may explain what I find most impressive in Foster's scholarship. He makes it possible to move between levels of analysis without treating them as interchangeable: from the corporation to the state, from finance to production, from the world market to the labor process, and from capital accumulation to earth-system change. His theory travels across levels because its concepts retain their historical specificity while revealing relations that disciplinary specialization tends to pull apart.

John Bellamy Foster's body of work offers one of the most ambitious contemporary reconstructions of Marxist political economy and ecology. Extending the Monthly Review tradition of monopoly capital theory, Foster argues that mature capitalism is governed by giant corporations, chronic surplus absorption problems, and a tendency toward stagnation. Financialization is not a departure from capitalism's "real" economy but a structural response to monopoly stagnation, creating temporary outlets to deploy surplus through debt, speculation, and asset inflation. This same system depends on imperial relations that organize global labor, resources, finance, and ecological drains through unequal exchange and geopolitical

1. This essay does not delimit the scope of Foster's broader scholarly program. His work extends well beyond the critique of capitalist crisis tendencies, encompassing major contributions to the history of socialism, theories of imperialism, the labor process, environmental sociology, the history of science, ecological Marxism, and related fields. The present reflective study is therefore not an exhaustive account of Foster's theoretical contributions over the last four decades, but a focused interpretation of one central thread in that larger body of work: his integrated theory of capitalist crisis.

domination. Foster's distinctive contribution is to show that these economic and imperial contradictions are inseparable from ecological crisis. Capital accumulation ruptures the metabolism between human society and nature, producing what he calls the ecological rift. In this sense, financial crisis, imperial crisis, and climate crisis are not separate pathologies; they are different expressions of a single system of monopoly-finance capital confronting the limits of social and ecological reproduction.

This article reads Foster's theoretical contributions to capitalist crises as visionary in this larger sense. His work is not a portfolio of separate interventions, some economic and others ecological. It is a theory of capitalist crisis whose distinct moments illuminate each other. Monopoly capital generates surplus while restricting profitable productive outlets. Financialization absorbs and multiplies claims on that surplus without eliminating the stagnation tendency. Imperialism extends accumulation through global labor arbitrage, unequal exchange, resource appropriation, and coercive power. Militarism absorbs surplus and organizes high technology while defending a declining imperial order. Ecological rifts emerge because the whole system treats the conditions of life as inputs, sinks, and fields of accumulation.

Foster's Integrated Theory of Crisis

Foster's intellectual range can obscure the consistency of his project. *The Theory of Monopoly Capitalism* reconstructed the political economy of Baran, Sweezy, Kalecki, Steindl, and the Monthly Review tradition. *Marx's Ecology* challenged the claim that Marx was indifferent to nature and showed that materialism, metabolism, and ecological contradiction were central to his critique. Later work with Fred Magdoff and Robert McChesney explained the Great Financial Crisis as an expression of monopoly-finance capital. Work with Brett Clark, Richard York, Hannah Holleman, and others connected accumulation to ecological imperialism, planetary boundaries, militarism, surveillance, and the robbery of labor and nature. *The Return of Nature* recovered the wider socialist and materialist tradition in which these questions developed.

The coherence is methodological as well as substantive. Foster works historically, reconstructing theoretical lineages while asking how capitalism's laws of motion change as its institutions change. He

neither replaces Marx with Monopoly Capital theory nor treats nineteenth-century competitive capitalism as the last word on accumulation. The rise of the giant corporation, administered prices, multinational production, extractivism, modern finance, advertising, military demand, and the permanent sales effort alters the forms in which capitalist contradictions appear. Marx's categories remain indispensable, but historical materialism requires analysis of capitalism's changing forms.

This is why Foster insists that monopoly does not abolish competition. Concentrated firms engage in intense rivalry over costs, technologies, markets, patents, platforms, acquisitions, and political advantages. What changes is the form of rivalry as concentration and centralization reorganize competitive struggle (Konat and Foster 2018, 3). Dominant firms avoid sustained price competition that would destroy profit margins, while competing through product differentiation, technological control, mergers, intellectual property, global supply chains, finance, and state power. That historical approach also distinguishes Foster's crisis theory from accounts organized around a single contradiction. Economic crisis cannot be reduced to deficient consumption, a falling profit rate, financial panic, resource scarcity, or ecological limits alone. Each mechanism matters, but capitalism joins them in historically specific configurations. Foster's concept of an "epochal crisis" names the convergence of economic stagnation, imperial instability, and planetary ecological emergency (Foster 2013). These crises have different rhythms and mechanisms. They nevertheless arise from a common system whose accumulation imperative reorganizes social relations and the human relation to the earth.

Foster's ecological dimension is therefore not an additive after the economic analysis. Likewise, stagnation is not merely background for ecological critique. Capital's responses to stagnation - financial expansion, commodity proliferation, militarism, privatization, global labor arbitrage, and the search for new resource frontiers - intensify ecological rift. Conversely, ecological constraints become new domains for finance, enclosure, and imperial conflict. Foster's theoretical vision is dialectical because solutions within the system become new sources of contradiction.

This theoretical unity required substantial intellectual-historical work. *Marx's Ecology* reconstructed the importance of Epicurean materialism, natural science, soil chemistry, and the concept of metabolism

in Marx's development. It thereby challenged two influential assumptions: that Marx's critique was confined to relations among human beings, and that socialism necessarily inherited capitalism's productivist desire to dominate nature. *The Return of Nature* widened the reconstruction, tracing how socialist thinkers and scientists developed materialist ecology through evolutionary theory, physics, biology, geography, and struggles over work and industrialism. Foster restored a tradition that the institutional siloing of the natural and social sciences makes difficult to recognize. This articulation matters politically. If ecological destruction is attributed only to bad technology, consumer preference, population, or insufficient regulation, the structure of accumulation remains untouched. If it is treated only as an automatic consequence of capital, political agency disappears. Foster avoids both errors. The metabolic rift is historically produced through property relations, class power, and specific technologies; it can therefore be contested through movements, public institutions, and transformations of production relations. But repair cannot be reduced to cleaner commodities inside an unchanged accumulation regime.

This is also why Foster's socialism is not simply a more efficient administration of growth. His language of sustainable human development joins substantive equality, anti-racism, democratic planning, reduced working time, communal forms, and ecological restoration. The alternative measure of wealth is not the endless enlargement of commodity output but the development of human capacities within the conditions of planetary life. This emancipatory orientation gives coherence to critical theory: the point of identifying growth is to ask how collective abundance might be sustained, not hoarded by an oligarchic class.

Monopoly, Surplus, and the Tendency toward Stagnation

Surplus absorption emerges as a central limitation to capitalism (Foster 1986). In a mature capitalist economy dominated by giant firms, the capacity to generate surplus can exceed the availability of profitable outlets for expanding productive capacity. Monopoly firms can defend markups by limiting production and maintaining prices rather than clearing markets through destructive price competition. High margins coexist with excess capacity. Excess capacity, in turn, weakens the incentive to build more capacity. Accumulated capital becomes a barrier to further accumulation.

In a recent interview, Foster gives the point a concise formulation: "the central problem is thus surplus absorption" (Konat and Foster 2018, 2).[2] The claim is not that capitalism ceases to grow, innovate, or invest. Stagnation is a tendency toward sluggish productive investment, underused capacity, unemployment or underemployment, and a persistent gap between potential surplus and ordinary investment outlets. Counterforces can offset that tendency for long periods. Transformative technologies, state expenditures, suburbanization, advertising, luxury consumption, imperial expansion, debt, financial bubbles, and war have all mobilized otherwise idle surplus.

The distinction between tendency and outcome is essential. Monopoly Capital theory does not predict a flat line. It asks why growth in mature capitalism repeatedly depends on extraordinary stimuli, billionaire hoarding, and socially irrational expenditures. The postwar automobile-suburban complex, for example, stimulated housing, highways, steel, oil, consumer durables, and mass credit. Military Keynesianism supplied protected public demand. Financialization later supported consumption and asset appreciation through expanding debt. Each counterforce could generate real growth. None abolished the underlying overaccumulation problem.

This gives stagnation a meaning different from simple underconsumption. Weak mass purchasing power matters, particularly when productivity rises faster than wages. But the deeper problem concerns investment. Even if demand is supported by credit or government spending, firms with unused productive capacity may not expand capacity. Foster treats accumulation inherited from the past as a

2. On the question of surplus and crisis, a tendency in Marxist political economy, broadly understood as profitability-centered Marxian crisis theory, represents an alternative to Monopoly Capital (Kliman 2015; Roberts 2016; Carchedi 2011; Shaikh 2016; and Moseley 1991, 2016). This scholarship is varied in method and politics. But it represents a broad Marxian alternative to Monopoly Capital theory insofar as they locate capitalist crisis primarily in the production of surplus value and the movement of the profit rate, rather than in monopoly-generated surplus absorption and stagnation. The falling-profit-rate approach asks why producing surplus value becomes more difficult relative to accumulated capital. Monopoly Capital theory asks why realized surplus cannot find sufficient profitable productive outlets. Both mechanisms can reinforce each other, but neither should be collapsed into the other. A rebound in measured corporate profitability may result from wage repression, tax reductions, monopoly pricing, cheap credit, asset gains, or value captured from globalized production via labor arbitrage and trigger a historical shift in the organization of capitalism (Foster and McChesney 2012; Dreiling and Darves 2016). It can coexist with sluggish net investment and excess capacity. Conversely, a spectacular investment boom in one concentrated sector, such as AI, need not establish a generalized recovery of accumulation.

barrier to further accumulation through excess capacity (Konat and Foster 2018, 2). Monopoly capitalism produces abundant surplus yet restricts the channels through which it can be profitably and productively reinvested.

We can see this today in speculative investment frenzies around AI and in the renewed flurry of armaments production. AI appears in this light as a potentially exceptional outlet: a cluster of technologies that demand enormous immediate investment in chips, data centers, electrical grids, low orbit satellite transmission, networking, and software. It can counter stagnation precisely because it creates new capacity rather than merely bidding up existing assets. But its emergence within monopoly-finance capitalism shapes what is built and why. Investment is concentrated in a handful of firms controlling cloud platforms, computing bottlenecks, proprietary models, data, and intellectual property. Anticipated monopoly rents help justify expenditures. Asset markets capitalize future expectations before their realization. The outlet for surplus is therefore also a mechanism for concentrating claims on future surplus. Foster refers to the dominant tech firms Microsoft, Amazon Web Services, Google (Alphabet), and Meta, as "the Great Houses of AI" (2026, 1), a phrase that captures both their technical centrality and their corporate scale. Crawford's formulation is blunter: "AI is neither artificial nor intelligent" (2021, 8). Its apparent autonomy is produced by an extensive social and material apparatus, while its expected returns are privatized through firms already positioned to capture rents from computing, data, and intellectual property.

The contemporary AI boom and a Big Tech oligarchy do not sit outside of Foster's framework as novel exceptions. They reveal the continuing analytical force of his theoretical approach. They also suggest an extension: in the present conjuncture, AI and Trump's imperial aggression function as counterforces to stagnation that are simultaneously productive and speculative, civilian and coercive, ideological and material. They stimulate accumulation while deepening monopoly, financial fragility, imperial danger, labor displacement, and ecological overshoot.

Feverish Investment in a Stagnant Economy: The Case of AI

Foster opens his 2026 must-read essay "The Fetishism of AI" in *Monthly Review* by locating the boom within "a new era of concentration and centralization of monopoly-finance capital" (2026, 1). This formulation captures the integrative reach of his theory. AI is at once

a field of fixed investment and speculative valuation, an instrument for reorganizing labor, a platform for imperial and military power, and an expanding material claim on energy, water, minerals, and land. The data center therefore offers a concrete entry into Foster's larger account of crisis: technological dynamism does not suspend stagnation, monopoly, or ecological rift, but reorganizes their relations.

Across the desert outside Phoenix, the plains of northern Virginia, and the transmission corridors of the Pacific Northwest, are some of the newest monuments of Big Tech. Inside these data centers, servers store commercial records, route online purchases, host websites, deliver streaming media, place advertisements, sustain social networks, lease computing capacity, and train and run artificial intelligence models. Outside them, utilities search for electricity, local governments negotiate tax concessions, and communities confront new demands on land, water, and infrastructure. The visible structure is a massive building, or cluster of tents and buildings. The larger historical structure is a wager.

The wager is not solely on AI. Data centers long preceded the current AI boom and remain the physical infrastructure of cloud computing, digital storage, e-commerce, financial transactions, web hosting, advertising, social media, entertainment, logistics, government records, and surveillance. AI has accelerated and altered their expansion, however, because training and operating large models can require unusually dense concentrations of advanced chips, electricity, cooling, and capital. The International Energy Agency estimates that global data-center electricity consumption could double between 2024 and 2030, reaching about 945 terawatt-hours; the U.S. Department of Energy estimates that data centers, which used about 4.4 percent of U.S. electricity in 2023, could account for between 6.7 and 12 percent by 2028 (IEA 2025; U.S. Department of Energy 2024).

This is real investment. It creates fixed capital and employs construction workers, engineers, electricians, chip designers, and utility workers. In 2025, investment in computers, software, communications equipment, and data centers made an outsized contribution to U.S. economic growth. Yet the buildout also carries familiar signatures of a speculative boom: large valuations based on future earnings; circular investments linking cloud providers, chip makers, and AI labs; rapid depreciation of specialized equipment; and unresolved questions about whether revenues will justify the scale of capital committed. The largest U.S. technology companies were projected to spend roughly $650 billion on AI-related infrastructure in 2026, up from approximately $410 billion in 2025 (Reuters 2026a). Productive

investment and financialized expectations are not opposites here. They are joined.

Nor are these installations designed primarily to solve the crises of modern life. They could support climate modeling, scientific research, medical discovery, public planning, and more efficient energy systems. Some do. But their dominant uses follow effective demand, corporate power, and cultural dominance: advertising, retailing, financial services, entertainment, data extraction, workplace control, surveillance, military systems, and the substitution of capital for labor. Their social purpose is not inherent in the machine. It is determined by ownership, markets, and the priorities of accumulation.

Foster's account turns on the reversal between appearance at the level of the market and underlying productive relations. AI presents itself as autonomous intelligence while concealing the collective intellectual labor, routine data work, mineral extraction, energy systems, and logistical infrastructures on which it depends. The new extractivism is, Foster argues, cognitive as well as ecological: social knowledge is enclosed as corporate property while the material costs of computation are displaced onto workers, communities, and ecosystems (Foster 2026; Crawford 2021, 8-19).

Financialization and the Paradox of Accumulation

In 2006, the forty-year anniversary of Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* (1966), Foster wrote: "The stagnation impasse described in *Monopoly Capital* has worsened: the underlying disease has spread and deepened while new corrosive symptoms have come into being. On the other hand, the system has found new ways of reproducing itself, and capital has paradoxically even prospered within this impasse, through the explosive growth of finance … . I will provisionally call this new hybrid phase of the system 'monopoly-finance capital'" (2006, 1). Foster's concept of monopoly-finance capital explains why finance became the leading counterforce to stagnation after the 1970s (2006, 2014). Financialization is not a parasite that invaded an otherwise healthy productive capitalism. Nor is it simply a policy error produced when the US dollar dropped the gold standard. It arises from the interaction between concentrated surplus, weak productive outlets, and an expanding financial apparatus capable of creating new assets, debts, and speculative claims (Foster and McChesney 2009; Foster 2014).

Finance absorbs surplus directly through investment in securities and indirectly through the demand supported by borrowing and

asset appreciation. Mortgage credit, consumer debt, securitization, derivatives, mergers, private equity, and rising equity and property values can sustain spending and profits even when wage growth and productive investment remain weak. Financial profits expand, while nonfinancial corporations increasingly behave as financial actors through cash management, acquisitions, lending, share repurchases, and the capitalization of intellectual property.

This relation is contradictory. Financial expansion can stimulate the economy, but the multiplication of claims cannot indefinitely outrun the production and realization of surplus. Konat and Foster define the stagnation-financialization trap as a condition in which "the economy stagnates except when inflated by credit-debt bubbles" (2018, 6). Bubbles temporarily solve the absorption problem while increasing fragility. When they burst, public authorities rescue asset values and restore liquidity, often socializing losses without creating a durable new path of productive accumulation (Foster and Magdoff 2009). In short, monopoly capital produces stagnation; stagnation produces surplus-seeking capital; surplus flows into finance; monopoly-finance creates temporary growth; bubbles burst; stagnation returns in intensified form.

The contemporary technology sector exemplifies this fusion. Big Tech corporations are not merely financial firms in disguise. They produce hardware, software, logistical systems, communications, and cloud services. Yet their industrial power is constituted through financial markets. Market capitalization provides acquisition currency and keeps management in line. Institutional investors connect ownership across nominally competing corporations. Foster nevertheless warns that these houses are "divided against themselves and cannot stand" (2026, 16). Their rivalry occurs within a shared dependence on state support, financial expectations, and ever-larger infrastructures, even as each seeks monopoly control over the field. Venture capital and private equity organize technological development before public listing. Subscription revenues, platforms, app stores, data, and patents create rent-like income streams that can be projected into valuations. Corporate cash becomes a source of buybacks, acquisitions, strategic stakes, and political power. For example, under the control of founding billionaire Larry Ellison and his son, Oracle's role extends far beyond computing and AI into corporate networking with Tesla, Paypal, X/Twitter, Apple, while consolidating a new mass media empire via acquisitions of Tik Tok, CBS/Paramount, and Skydance/Warner Bros.

Thus the rise of technology billionaires does not demonstrate the displacement of finance by a new industrial bourgeoisie. It indicates a more complete organizational fusion of industrial and financial capital. The platform is simultaneously a productive apparatus, a private market, a surveillance system, a rent-extracting institution, and a capitalized claim on future social knowledge. The billionaire founder personifies this fusion but does not create it. This is crucial to understanding the crisis in liberal democracy and the political alignment around the second authoritarian Trump administration. Foster describes not a populist conquest of the capitalist class but a recomposition within it, bringing high-technology, private equity, fossil-energy, and other billionaire interests into more direct political command (Foster 2025a, 2025b), a transformation that I describe elsewhere as "class tectonics" (Dreiling n.d.). The public spectacle of Big Tech executives courting the state should not substitute for structural analysis. Their power rests on ownership, Super-PACs, asset markets, government contracts, cloud infrastructure, intellectual property, data control, and the capacity to shape communication itself.

Imperialism as a Global Form of Monopoly-Finance Capital

Foster's analysis of imperialism extends the same accumulation problem across the world economy. Monopoly-finance capital cannot be understood within national boundaries because the mega-firm organizes production, finance, labor, and resource appropriation transnationally. Imperialism is therefore not reducible to territorial conquest, military intervention, or the foreign policy of a single state. It is a structured relation of accumulation that differentiates core and periphery while continually remaking both.

Several mechanisms are central. Multinational corporations use global labor arbitrage to locate production where wages and the costs of social reproduction are lower, labor protections are weaker, and states offer favorable infrastructure or regulation (Suwandi, Jonna, Foster 2019). Unequal exchange permits value produced in low-wage regions to be captured by firms, consumers, and financial institutions in the core. Debt relations discipline states and redirect public resources toward creditors. International IP rules and institutions (GATS, TRIPS, WTO) facilitate corporate control over patents, platforms, currencies, payment systems, logistics, and technical standards creates further channels for rent and value transfer. Ecological resources and wastes flow through the same hierarchy. Global labor arbitrage is not simply the movement of factories to cheaper places.

It is the corporate capacity to place workers in different national labor regimes into competition while coordinating production through global value chains and global institutions (Suwandi, et al 2019). The wage difference is not adequately explained by individual productivity. It is sustained by global agreements, borders, histories of colonialism, uneven development, reserve armies of labor, and unequal capacities of workers and states to claim the value produced (Dreiling 2026). Monopoly firms can organize and capture these differences even when they no longer own every stage of production.

This internationalization provides outlets for capital and cheapens inputs, but it does not eliminate stagnation. Export-oriented production in the periphery remains dependent on demand and financial conditions in the core. The suppression of labor costs that raises surplus also constrains global consumption. Profits captured from value chains can return to financial markets, mergers, buybacks, and other assets rather than new productive investment. The globalization of production and the financialization of surplus are therefore complementary, not competing, tendencies.

In *Global Trade Shocks* (2026), I draw on this insight to interpret the crises of neoliberal capitalism and the rise of Trumpism. The U.S. trade deficit, from this perspective, is not simply a temporary imbalance. It is a marker of hegemonic decline: a system in which the United States increasingly imports manufactured goods produced through global labor arbitrage while exporting financial claims, intellectual property rents, and coercive geopolitical power. This configuration benefits multinational capital and affluent consumers while exposing workers and regions to disinvestment, deindustrialization, trade shocks, and insecurity. A xenophobic political backlash can then be mobilized against immigrants, foreign workers and nation-states rather than against the corporate organization of production. Trump's tariffs express that displacement. They promise a restoration of national productive supremacy through coercive unilateralism, even while the leading fractions (including Trump's major supporters in Big Tech and Big Oil) of U.S. capital remain transnationally organized. Foster's framework helps identify this as a crisis within imperialism, not a retreat from it. Tariffs, sanctions, investment controls, and military pressure become instruments for reorganizing unequal relations under conditions of hegemonic decline (Dreiling 2026).

Further, Big Tech and its digital infrastructure are embedded in this global hierarchy. As MNCs embedded digital tools into operations and supply chains, data flows emerged as the backbone of both transnational labor control and commerce. By 2020, cross-border data flows

had grown nearly 45 times since 2005, vastly outpacing the growth in goods or services trade (Baldwin, 2019). As I argue in *Global Trade Shocks*, "data value chains" enable firms to mine user behavior, optimize logistics, and capture value from algorithmic control over markets and platforms. In this regime, control over proprietary software and data architecture becomes as important as physical production. On the ground, data centers appear local, but their servers, chips, minerals, electricity contracts, financing, and data flows connect multiple continents through labor, trade and investment agreements, financing, and ecology. Cloud platforms can centralize control in U.S.-based firms while distributing extraction, assembly, energy use, and waste elsewhere. AI models trained in the global core incorporate racialized labor in the Global South via mining, fabrication, data labeling, content moderation, and logistics. The apparent autonomy of the machine conceals a collective worker organized through imperial relations (Foster 2026).

Data Centers: Surplus Absorption and Metabolic Conflict

Data centers make the materiality of this accumulation regime visible. The language of "the cloud" suggests placelessness, but the cloud is an industrial system of buildings, servers, cables, substations, backup generators, cooling equipment, transmission lines, mines, semiconductor plants, and workers. Its services are extraordinarily diverse. AI is an expanding tenant, not the whole building. That distinction matters analytically and politically. It prevents every new data center from being counted as AI investment, and it prevents criticism of data-center expansion from collapsing into a judgment about AI alone. Even without generative AI, capitalist commerce and administration demand growing volumes of storage, computing, advertising, streaming, logistics, and surveillance. The current AI boom intensifies this longer digital transformation while changing the density, energy profile, and speculative expectations surrounding new facilities.

These infrastructures offer a powerful outlet for surplus. They absorb capital through construction, advanced machinery, electricity grids, and long-term energy contracts. They also create privately controlled bottlenecks. Hyperscale cloud firms like Amazon Web Services lease computing power to businesses and governments, host nominal competitors, finance AI laboratories, and control the infrastructures on which digital markets depend. The same investment can therefore expand productive capacity and deepen rent extraction.

What these machine-centers calculate is socially consequential. Under more socialist and democratic institutions, computational capacity could be organized around public health, decarbonization, climate adaptation, democratic planning, universal knowledge, and reduced toil. Under monopoly-finance capital, capacity follows profitable demand and strategic power. Vast computational resources are devoted to targeted advertising, high-frequency commerce, social media, streaming platforms, recommendation systems, financial modeling, retail optimization, workplace surveillance, weapons, and replacing labor. The point is not that socially beneficial applications are absent. It is that solving collective crises is not their governing design principle.

Foster's recent critique of AI identifies the fetishism that turns a collective social product into an apparently autonomous power standing over its producers. His conclusion that "the Great Houses of AI are divided against themselves" points to the contradiction between extraordinary technical capacities and the monopolistic relations governing them (Foster 2026, 16). The fetishized machine appears intelligent by itself while the labor, knowledge, infrastructures, and ecological systems embodied within it disappear from view.

Local resistance brings this contradiction into view. Communities have challenged data centers over electricity rates, transmission lines, water withdrawals, diesel emissions, continuous low-frequency noise, land conversion, tax subsidies, limited permanent employment, and secretive development agreements (Rogers et al. 2026). Northern Virginia, the world's largest concentration of data centers, has become a major site of such conflict. Similar campaigns have appeared in Georgia, Arizona, California, Missouri, Oregon, and elsewhere. In Monterey Park, California, a multilingual coalition won a moratorium after organizing around noise, energy use, diesel backup generation, and public health (McGreal 2026). National polling in June 2026 found that 57 percent of respondents opposed a data center in their community and 77 percent feared higher electricity costs (Reuters 2026b).

It is tempting to classify this as NIMBY politics. Sometimes it is: affluent communities may seek to displace unwanted infrastructure onto communities with less political power. But the label can also depoliticize legitimate struggles over who decides, who benefits, and who bears the costs. Ratepayer exposure, water scarcity, tax exemptions, cumulative pollution, and opaque land-use decisions are distributive and democratic questions. Data centers are often proposed in clusters, making project-by-project review poorly suited to cumulative

impacts (Rogers et al. 2026). Resistance can therefore express not a refusal of digital infrastructure as such, but a demand for public accounting, enforceable limits, community consent, and a different allocation of social surplus.

This is a classic surplus-absorption conflict. Firms and growth coalitions present the facility as investment that no rational locality should refuse. Residents encounter it as an externally organized claim on locally embedded resources. The benefits flow through corporate networks and asset values; many costs remain territorial. The struggle reveals how the celebrated weightlessness of digital capitalism rests upon a highly unequal material metabolism.

Militarism and the Imperial Uses of Surplus

If digital infrastructure provides a technological horizon of accumulation, militarism provides its geopolitical horizon. Military expenditure has long held a special place in Monopoly Capital theory. It creates state-guaranteed demand without directly expanding workers' consumption or adding civilian productive capacity to already saturated markets. It absorbs scientific labor, electronics, metals, software, fuel, and finance through contracts insulated from ordinary market discipline. It is therefore economically useful to monopoly capital even when it is socially destructive.

Military spending is not simply waste in the sense of inactivity. It produces weapons, bases, communications, logistical systems, research, and employment. Its waste lies in the relation between expenditure and human need. Resources are mobilized, but the resulting use values are designed for coercion, destruction, and geopolitical command. Military demand can stabilize accumulation precisely because its output does not have to be sold to mass consumers and because its costs are socialized through the state.

The digital and military complexes have never been separate. Computing, networking, satellites, semiconductors, geolocation, and the Internet developed through extensive state and military support. Foster and McChesney's account of surveillance capitalism connects the military-industrial complex with advertising, communications, and the financialized drive to capture data (2014). Today, cloud computing, AI, cybersecurity, autonomous systems, and space infrastructure tighten these relations. The leading technology firms are vendors, contractors, and infrastructural partners of the national-security state, and their deeper intrusion into state governance over the last twenty years has catalyzed the political crisis of liberal democracy.

The Trump presidencies reveal the economic and ideological significance of this union. Foster rejects portrayals of Trump as anti-imperialist. His first administration raised military spending, relaxed constraints on the use of force, and launched the New Cold War on China. The second administration proposed another large Pentagon increase while intensifying technological and economic conflict with China. What appears to some as retreat from liberal internationalism is, Foster argues, "a new global imperial strategy" intended to reverse U.S. hegemonic decline (2025a, 3). Military spending thus performs at least four functions. It absorbs surplus through protected demand. It operates as industrial policy for strategic sectors. It further binds technology firms to the state. And it offers an ideological response to decline rooted in domestic authoritarianism, ethno-nationalism, and coercive unilateralism. In the MAGA narrative, armaments promise to make the United States productive, sovereign, and feared again. The military budget becomes a material theater in which deindustrialization, trade deficits, and diminished hegemony can be translated into national restoration.

This project does not necessarily stabilize U.S. power. It may accelerate decline by redirecting resources from civilian infrastructure, welfare, climate mitigation, and productive renewal; by increasing debt; by intensifying geopolitical blocs; and by raising the danger of war. Foster's account of the Trump Doctrine identifies precisely this contradiction. A nationalist state seeks to discipline allies, extract tribute, and weaponize trade while monopoly-finance capital remains globally organized. The attempt to restore supremacy through coercive unilateralism can undermine the institutions, currencies, alliances, and production networks on which U.S. power depends (Dreiling 2026).

AI belongs inside this imperial contradiction. It is promoted as a commercial revolution and as a race for national survival. Export controls, chip policy, cloud infrastructure, data governance, and military applications join accumulation to security. If AI applications for civilian consumers result in disappointing returns, military, carceral, and surveillance demand can support the technological complex. If geopolitical rivalry intensifies, the promise of AI supremacy can legitimate still larger public subsidies and energy commitments. The investment frontier and the imperial project become mutually reinforcing.

Ecological Rift and the Limits of Crisis Management

Foster's most influential theoretical contribution is his reconstruction of Marx's ecological thought through social metabolism and

metabolic rift. In *Marx's Ecology* and his earlier *American Journal of Sociology* article, Foster showed that Marx understood labor as a material interchange between human beings and nature, and capitalist production as a historically specific organization of that interchange (Foster 1999, 2000). The separation of town and country and the removal of nutrients from the soil exemplified a broader rupture: production organized for accumulation undermines the ecological conditions of reproduction.

Metabolic rift is more than a metaphor for environmental harm. It identifies a contradiction between capital's value-expanding logic and the material cycles through which life is sustained. Capital encounters labor, soil, energy, water, forests, minerals, and the atmosphere as means of valorization and as apparently free conditions of production. Costs can be displaced across space, class, race, empire, and generations. Yet the biophysical conditions cannot be escaped. Accumulation depends on the very systems it destabilizes.

The concept unifies Foster's political economy. Financialization capitalizes claims on future production and increasingly on nature itself. Imperialism transfers materials, labor, and ecological burdens from periphery to core. Militarism consumes energy and materials, contaminates landscapes, and protects access to strategic resources. Monopoly restricts democratic control over technology and investment. Stagnation encourages commodity proliferation, planned obsolescence, speculative frontiers, and wasteful demand. Ecological crisis is not a fifth problem added to the other four. It is their material, ecological history.

Data centers illustrate the point with unusual clarity. They are presented as gateways to an immaterial future, yet they require continuous flows of electricity and water, rapid equipment replacement, mineral-intensive chips, concrete, land, and backup generation. The IEA projects that renewables will supply much of the growth in data-center electricity, but natural gas, coal, and nuclear power will also expand to meet it (IEA 2025). In regions with constrained grids or scarce water, corporate demand can compete with household affordability, decarbonization, agriculture, and other public priorities.

The question is not whether data centers can become more efficient. Efficiency gains are real and necessary. But under conditions of expanding demand, they can lower costs and stimulate still more computation - a digital form of the Jevons paradox. Nor is the answer simply to locate every facility elsewhere. Spatial displacement reproduces ecological imperialism at smaller and larger scales. A democratic response would ask which computational uses deserve priority, how

total demand should be governed, how costs should be distributed, and whether public subsidies advance public purposes.

Community opposition can contain the beginnings of this politics. At its most limited, it protects one locality while leaving the accumulation imperative intact. At its most expansive, it challenges secrecy, private control of infrastructure, regressive subsidies, and the assumption that any investment increasing property values is socially necessary. It makes visible a question that Foster's work places at the center of socialist ecology: can the surplus generated by collective labor be democratically directed toward sustainable human development rather than accumulation for its own sake?

This question also bears on what Yvonne Braun and I have called the anti-truth imperative of dirty energy (Dreiling and Braun, n.d.). Fossil-fuel and nuclear industries confront a double contradiction. Ecologically, their accumulation depends upon material throughputs that destabilize climate, water, soils, oceans, and living systems. Sociologically, they are fixed in sunk capital, rents, regulatory institutions, and elite networks whose power depends on continuing that throughput. The result is not merely occasional dishonesty. It is a structural compulsion to conceal, minimize, fragment, or defer knowledge of harm.

The concept can be extended cautiously to digital infrastructure. Technology firms need not deny that data centers consume electricity and water; they can instead isolate each facility, emphasize efficiency per computation, promise distant technological solutions, or present aggregate expansion as unavoidable. The relevant costs become technical details, while the social purpose of the computation escapes scrutiny. Organized uncertainty protects investment from democratic judgment. Foster's method directs attention beyond misleading claims to the institutional relations that make those claims necessary.

This question also clarifies the limits of the AI boom as a response to stagnation. The buildout may create a major investment wave. It cannot by itself determine socially rational ends, distribute its gains, restore ecological cycles, or overcome the contradiction between labor-saving technology and wage-dependent demand. Extraction is at the center of the social and ecological production relations for AI. Materially, the AI boom extends a form of extraction that draws heavily on rare-earth minerals for chips, and requires enormous amounts of concrete, energy, water, further delaying a cleaner energy transition. The AI boom also involves another form of extraction, what Foster terms "the theft by AI of all past intellectual labor" (2026). The stronger the boom becomes as a model of accumulation,

the more it can intensify the energy, resource, and class contradictions it promises to solve.

The Vision beyond Crisis

Foster is a theoretical visionary not because he predicts each crisis in advance, though his work has often been prescient. His deeper contribution is to alter what can be seen together. Monopoly, finance, empire, militarism, class domination, and ecological breakdown become moments of a single historical system without losing their specificity. The framework explains how capitalism can be stagnant and feverishly expansionary, innovative and socially irrational, globally integrated and violently nationalist, materially productive and destructive of the conditions of life.

The contemporary convergence of AI investment, data-center expansion, Big Tech oligarchy, and renewed militarism confirm the value of that vision. These developments mobilize enormous productive capacities. They also reveal an economy unable to direct its abundance toward universally recognized needs. Capital readily finds hundreds of billions for computing infrastructures organized around advertising, commerce, surveillance, labor displacement, and military advantage. It opposed struggles to provide decarbonized energy, housing, health, education, ecological repair, and secure livelihoods except where these can be made vehicles of private accumulation. That is the paradox of surplus in a society governed by scarcity. The constraint is not an absolute lack of knowledge, labor, or means. It is the social organization of investment. AI and military expenditure can counter stagnation, but they do so by deepening concentrated ownership, speculative valuation, imperial conflict, and metabolic rift. The counterforce becomes another dimension of crisis.

Foster's work is not only diagnostic. He calls for a "socialist approach to AI" that "focuses above all on the historical and social relations that brought it about in conjunction with capitalism, thus demystifying the current AI fetishism and making it clear that the path ahead for humanity is ultimately *up to us*, requiring a struggle of revolutionary scale and content" (Foster 2026, 2; see also Foster 2025c). Its emancipatory horizon is sustainable human development: the democratic and egalitarian direction of social surplus toward substantive needs, shortened labor time, ecological restoration, and the free and cooperative development of human capacities. Technology is neither rejected nor worshipped. Its promise depends upon transforming the relations of production through which it is designed and used.

The decisive question, then, is not whether AI is productive, data centers are necessary, or military expenditure creates jobs. Each requires, and organizes labor, science, and fixed capital. The question is what kind of social reproduction they secure. Under monopoly-finance capital, the answer is increasingly stark: production without democratic direction, innovation without common ownership of knowledge, security without peace, and accumulation without metabolic repair. Foster's theoretical vision helps us imagine the alternative because it shows why these failures belong together.

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