

The only answer is revolution — An Interview

On “Marx’s ecology” - materialism and nature

Monday 17 September 2007, by [FISCHER Mark](#), [FOSTER John Bellamy](#) (Date first published: 10 November 2005).

The book *Marx’s ecology - materialism and nature* by John Bellamy Foster does much to reclaim a lost tradition of ecological thinking in Marxism. As CPGB comrades in London draw towards the end of an extensive series of seminars based on this work, Mark Fischer spoke to the author about the relationship of red and green.

Our collective study of your book in London has been very productive. The question of how Marxists relate to environmental issues - as Marxists rather as born-again greens - is clearly a controversial one.

It’s encouraging that you have found *Marx’s ecology* so useful. The object of that book was, of course, to get such discussions on the left going.

The answer to your question is complicated. There definitely is a danger in the sense that at least some of the views of the Greens - as a party-movement - are hardly progressive. There are some definite reactionary views mixed in there. So Marxists have to address them critically, like anything else.

Yet there is a lot to be learned from the Green perspective as well. Some parts are very radical, progressive and even revolutionary. There are leftwing and rightwing Greens. This is an added complication when we come to engage with them as Marxists. Some of those who identify themselves as Green take a very Malthusian position, as you know. They are effectively anti-population, anti-human and anti-development in a way that doesn’t take into account the fact that there are whole areas of the earth where the people *need* development.

Of course, it has to be sustainable development, but in some third world countries development is vital. What is needed is not capitalist development, not industrialisation as we know it, but development nevertheless.

So an uncritical rejection of development is not correct. Nor is it right to look on population as the main problem. Certainly population growth is a problem, but once you identify it as the key problem facing us, you point things in a very reactionary direction.

In terms of Marxism and socialism in general, there is a perception that it came to ecological thinking late; that it was slow in encompassing this area of thought. This is simply not correct. I make a distinction here between ecological understandings - which involve the interrelatedness, interdependence and co-evolution of human beings and nature (including ecological *science*) - and

the development of what has been called ecologism, or Green thought. The latter is a particular political form and, though important, it is not the same as ecology or ecological science.

When we look at the real history of the emergence of ecological thinking and science, there can be little doubt that Marxists and socialists were forerunners of it. They were many of the principal figures in the development of ecological thought and science. So the notion that socialists came to this field late is completely mistaken - it's almost the exact opposite of the true history.

Obviously, the experience of the Stalinist USSR is an important factor in the explanation for that.

Of course. Yet the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 30s had the most dynamic ecological science of any country on the planet. It had the greatest innovators and thinkers like Vernadsky, Oparin, Vavilov, Hessen and so on - but then most of these people were purged, executed or sidelined. Of course, Bukharin was very advanced in his ecological thinking and his fate is well known.

Partly as a result of socialist primitive accumulation in the 1930s, the Soviet Union turned against the ecological thinkers within the materialist tradition. That was a part of the much greater tragedy of the USSR.

But I think that we can make a mistake here. On the one hand, we say that socialists have some extra burden of guilt to carry in respect to the environment. That somehow socialists are not truly environmental thinkers - as evidenced by the Soviet Union, which had a very bad record in that context. But then, on the other, we don't critique the mainstream liberal tradition, as if it has a legitimacy we lack, as if it did not promote rapacious economic growth, waste resources, spread toxins, kill off species, induce global warming, etc - and often deliberately, without conscience, and on a planetary level.

Ecological thought, as it developed, was even more antagonistic to classical liberalism than classical socialism. There is no sense in which the liberal capitalist tradition was open to ecological thinking while socialism was not.

Surely part of the problem of the Marxist left establishing any sort of principled dialogue with the Green movement is that the 'Marxists' are quite ignorant of those healthy elements of our tradition.

That's true. Also, it is a result of how we learned our Marxism. It certainly was a central question for Marx - something that was understood in the first decades after his death. It disappeared in the 1930s with Stalinism.

Western Marxism turned against science in the 1920s and 30s as a reaction to developments in both east and west. This was a period when ecological insights practically disappeared from the core of socialist thought - outside of the sciences. (It is important to acknowledge, of course, that the liberal-capitalist tradition was not forwarding ecological ideas in that period either.)

There are different ways to read Marxism and the most common in recent decades has been to ignore everything Marx and Engels wrote about materialism and science. Instead people concentrate on the texts more centred on philosophy that anticipated critical theory. We read the *Economic and philosophical manuscripts* but usually skip over what Marx had to say about nature. We read volume one of *Capital*, but we don't read volume three, where he addressed ecological issues in the context of his treatment of agriculture. We tend to approach his thought very selectively and one-sidedly.

It has been customary in recent decades to approach Marx in a way that sidelines these questions of his ecological thinking. And Engels too, who dealt even more directly with science - although I do think the most powerful ecological insights belong to Marx. Western Marxism became very anti-science in a way.

For instance, we have the position of Lukács - admittedly not a consistent one - that the dialectic does not apply to nature. His thought was more sophisticated than that bald statement would imply, but that was the view commonly ascribed to him ...

A problem, because implicitly it poses an absolute dichotomy between humanity and nature.

Yes, western Marxism created that dichotomy, while Soviet Marxism killed off its ecologists. In both instances, Marxism lost its connection to genuine ecological science for a period.

The irony is that thinkers like Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Lewontin, Richard Levins and Steven Rose did carry on a Marxists tradition in science that was very dialectical. Gould, Levins and Lewontin (and they weren't alone - think of Haldane) became major figures in evolutionary theory, but the rest of the Marxist tradition ignored them. They carried forward a tradition of a dialectical socialist analysis of nature and its dynamics that had been part of the classical Marxist tradition.

If you look at the early development of ecological science, the leading figures - particularly amongst those relating ecology to society - were socialists and Marxists. For example, Ray Lankester, who was a younger friend of Marx's. He was the greatest biologist in Britain of his day. Darwin had carried him on his shoulders when he was a boy; he was Huxley's protégé. He was the one Englishman at Marx's funeral. He came to Marx's house frequently, was friendly with Eleanor and they visited him at his home.

Gould wrote about Lankester but couldn't quite figure out their commonality - what brought them together was their shared *materialism*. Lankester was a very firm materialist and a socialist, of a Fabian variety. He read and was strongly impressed by Marx's *Capital*. He was the leading Darwinian thinker in the generation after Darwin and wrote some of the most powerful ecological essays of his day, focussing particularly on extinction and pollution in London. He influenced people like HG Wells, a friend of his as well as his student, Arthur Tansley - also a strong materialist and Fabian-style socialist.

Tansley developed the concept of the ecosystem and, in doing so, he relied on the work of Hyman Levy, a leading British Marxist scientist, and the materialist tradition going back to Epicurus. He was connected to Lancelot Hogben. All of these figures were in a struggle with general Smuts and his followers in South Africa, who were developing a racist ecological holism.

Anyway, the point I am trying to stress is that there is a whole line of materialist, socialist ecological thought that actually became influential in the various scientific fields related to ecology. It traces a direct line of descent from Liebig, Marx, Engels and the British socialist and Marxist scientists. The whole area of thought was wrapped up in the concept of metabolism that Marx applied to ecological issues, and which came to be seen at the level of the organism as parallel to the concept of ecosystem, which Tansley developed.

There was a kind of linear theoretical development in which socialists and Marxists were absolutely central. You can see this influence in the early work of the Odums in the United States. Rachel Carson drew her approach to ecology, when she put forth her version of this following the publication of *Silent Spring*, from the theory of the origins of life introduced by Haldane and Oparin.

The left today is intellectually impoverished, by comparison. It doesn't know its own history, for a start. But also its rather philistine general culture doesn't allow it to interact with and comment on science in a worthwhile way. Of course, there are Marxist scientists - but they are 'specialists'. Marx and Engels, for example, read voraciously in the sciences and could comment with authority on its debates and insights.

One of the criticisms that has been levelled at Marx and Engels is that they rejected the early developments in thermodynamics and early attempts at ecological economics. Paul Burkett and I have been doing research on this question and have recently finished two papers that show, much to my surprise, that this is all false. They were very familiar with the material - they had read the early studies of thermodynamics and actually integrated them into their analysis in *Capital* and elsewhere.

All the allegations in this respect turned out to be false once we investigated them. What amazes me is how well read in science Marx and Engels were at every level - the classical Marxist analysis was very broad. They did not pretend to be major contributors to the natural and physical sciences, but they incorporated the best science of their time into their work, and critically appraised it through their materialism and the dialectic, which kept them from making serious errors. Marxism got narrowed down later on. The revolt against positivism that started in western Marxism in the 1920s with people like Lukács and Gramsci was very important, but ended up throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Science was expelled along with positivism.

In Britain, Christopher Caudwell was enormously advanced in his ecological discussions, but the main line of western Marxism found itself revolting against positivism to such a degree that it rejected whole integral parts of the Marxist tradition. For instance, I would say that Second and Third International thinkers made a lot of mistakes. But it is irrational to dump these intellectual traditions in their entirety - to fail to note the areas where they were doing really creative, pioneering work.

When I first read Bukharin's *Historical materialism*, I recognised that some aspects of it were mechanistic, but the dominant tendency within it, and materialist Marxism in general, was to try to overcome mechanism and build a dialectical materialism. In some places they did succeed and they produced powerful insights into the relationship between humanity and nature. Some of the chapters in Bukharin's *Philosophical Arabesques* - such as 'Living nature and the artistic attitude toward it' and 'Evolution' - are absolutely astonishing, even by present-day standards, in their appreciation of co-evolution and humanity and nature.

You mentioned the left and right trends within the Green movement, but wouldn't you say there is often a programmatic commonality between these two wings? The solutions to ecological problems are framed in terms of limitations being imposed on humans. Obviously, the communist notion of abundance doesn't imply that we want to see a world swamped in crap, but we should want to actually increase humanity's impact on nature. We need a dramatic growth in our understanding of nature, our ability to utilise its laws for the benefit of both humanity and the environment. We see the potential in our species to establish a reciprocal, unalienated relationship with nature - we do not believe that humanity's impact must be kept to a minimum because it is inevitably detrimental.

I agree with all or most of this - though I do think it will be necessary for us to live lightly on the earth. This general understanding of a dynamic relation to sustainability (of a kind that capitalism is patently incapable of) is one that we must bring to the Green movement.

Francis Bacon has often been made the whipping boy of ecological politics. Of course, there are some justifications for a critical approach. Bacon said we have to "master" nature, but also that we

can only do so by following its laws. There's a paradox within his thought, therefore. Some followers of Bacon, such as John Eveyln, virtually introduced the issue of conservation at a practical level. Even though the Baconians were accused of having this narrowly exploitative attitude to nature, you have that tradition coming from them. So again, it's a complex issue.

I think the only answer is to focus on sustainability and co-evolution. To recognise that human beings have a responsibility to establish a sustainable relationship to nature. But in this, we can't flee to nature - in some way retreat to some idyll where these problems did not exist.

In Marx's words, we have to regulate our metabolic interaction with nature as associated producers who are consciously and democratically *planning*. I don't see any other answer than that. It has to take sustainability as its criterion - as Marx himself explained. We have to be the custodians of the earth for future generations. In order to do this we have to change our whole set of priorities, which means a direct conflict with capitalism. We have to begin by ensuring that all people have adequate diets, clean water, sanitation, essential healthcare, etc, as part of a general programme of human and ecological sustainability. No such guarantees are possible within the context of capitalism.

Green politics, especially in the United States, descends into the notion that somehow we have to think like a mountain - the sort of view that is associated with Aldo Leopold, someone I greatly admire in many respects. But human beings can't think like mountains - they can only think like human beings. There is also an emphasis on our spiritual relationship to nature, which we all have and Bukharin actually discusses in *Philosophical Arabesques*.

But we have to understand the human relation to nature as a *material* problem if we are going to solve it in any way. We still have to meet human needs from our metabolic interaction with nature, physically as well as spiritually. We can't entirely abandon industrialisation: we have to *change* it. We can't retreat to some historical era where we were somehow more in harmony with nature: we have to go forward as a society.

Because socialists refuse to give up the notion of development altogether but seek rather to revolutionise its form, we are castigated as enemies of the environment by many Greens. I know there are many who *call themselves* socialists who effectively end up with very rightwing views in this sense - ignoring sustainability and promoting economic growth at any cost. This further generates misunderstandings between socialists and Greens.

Greens in the US tend to emphasise individualism. According to this view we should solve the problems of the earth by recycling and reducing our consumption. In terms of the structures of the system, this doesn't make very much sense at all. Having a new spiritual relationship to the earth is OK and acting as individuals to defend the earth is commendable, but if we can't change our material practices and social relations, then such spirituality and individual action is meaningless.

Marxists better understand the obstacles that capitalism poses to ecological change, and recognise that the only answer is a revolutionary one. There is still hope that the kind of ecological materialism that classical Marxism generated will increasingly converge with left green analysis and movements and create a stronger movement for human and ecological revolution - a movement that will have to be socialist to succeed.

P.S.

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