

Marx and Nature

Human beings are a natural resource too

Saturday 23 October 2010, by [TANURO Daniel](#) (Date first published: June 2007).

In his introduction to the Socialist Resistance day school on ecosocialism, Daniel Tanuro, Belgian environmentalist and contributor to *International Viewpoint*, takes to task revolutionary Marxists of the twentieth century who have been slow to understand the importance of ecology while Marx himself understood the basic contradiction between capitalism's need for unlimited growth and the limits of material resources.

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Revolutionary Marxists have been slow to commit themselves to the environmental question. That is why I decided, a few years ago, to read or re-read Marx and Engels from the point of view of ecology as a science. I believed that Marx and Engels had not given enough importance to the relationship between mankind and nature, had no global consciousness of the natural limits – limits of resources, limits to human development – and that at best they only had had ‘brilliant intuitions’ (to quote Daniel Bensaid) about the environmental consequences of capitalism. At that time, I believed, like many others I suspect, that this ecological gap in Marx's and Engels' works was the main reason for the underestimation of the ecological challenge by our political current, and by the radical left in general. I thought we ought to be modest and accept this weakness of our theoretical legacy, in order to rectify our political message, to supplement our programme and to change our activity.

An amazing weakness

Today, I still think we should rectify our message, supplement our programme and change our activity. Following Michaël Lowy, we can define ourselves as ‘ecosocialists’, for instance, in order to make clear that we have really changed, that we have broken with productivism and a non-dialectical conception of progress. But I came to the conclusion that my opinion on Marx and Engels in relation to the environment was wrong: far from being an obstacle they are an asset. I would not pretend that Marx and Engels were premature ecologists: it would be ridiculous to say that, they were not committed to nature conservation but to social emancipation. Nor would I say that they anticipated the global environmental crisis we face today: they did not. But it is amazing that they didn't. Indeed, Marx had a clear understanding of the basic contradiction between the potentially unlimited character of value accumulation, on the one hand, and the limited character of some natural resources, especially the soil, on the other hand. He saw capitalism and nature (including human nature) as antagonistic, but he did not explore the consequences of this for nature in general (as he did for the human labour force), and he did not envisage that this antagonism would lead mankind into a cul-de-sac. This lack of global anticipation might be seen as a weakness in his

thought. But while it may be seen as a weakness, this is because the conceptual framework he had elaborated could well have led him to anticipate the ecological crisis, in the same way that it had led him to anticipate other dimensions of capitalist development.

In this debate on the appreciation of Marx I broadly agree with John Bellamy Foster. Indeed, there is something like 'an ecology of Marx'. Let us take the question of limits, which is obviously decisive from an ecological point of view. One central concept in Marx's thought on this topic is that of the 'social metabolism' between mankind and nature. Marx came to this concept thanks to the works of the agro-chemist Liebig, who had produced evidence that urbanization had broken up the nutrient cycle: mineral matter incorporated in food, clothes, etc. was exported to cities and eventually polluted the rivers and the sea, instead of going back into the soil as it had in pre-capitalist societies. Marx noticed that the development of a world market was giving a huge push to this process, through the massive export of agricultural products from dominated to imperialist countries. He even wrote that the use of mineral fertilizers, chemical fertilizers, and the mechanisation of agriculture would not provide a structural solution to the problem, because the growth in social productivity of human work could only partially and temporarily compensate for the decrease in natural productivity of the soil, because natural fertility is 'a limit, a starting point and a basis'. In Marx's view, a structural solution can only come from a rational management of the exchange of matter between mankind and nature, which he calls 'the regulation of social metabolism'. This same concept was developed later by the famous American ecologist Barry Commoner in his fascinating book, *The Closing Circle*. The programmatic conclusion follows logically: a radical reverse in the separation between town and country is a key point for a (eco)socialist alternative. This perspective is for Marx as important as the abolition of the capitalist division of work.

40 years after the Silent Spring...

It seems evident to me that the writings of Marx on social metabolism are a remarkable anticipation of the concept of sustainable development, in the real sense of this expression. Barry Commoner recognizes that fact explicitly and he quotes Marx on this topic. It is true that some other quotations make it possible to develop a more productivist interpretation of Marxism. But, even if one considers that two interpretations are possible, the question remains: why did we, revolutionary Marxists, ignore the ecologist interpretation? Why didn't we develop Marx's concept of a socially regulated, man-nature metabolism? Why did it take the Fourth International forty years after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* to adopt a resolution on ecology? It is clear that such a delay cannot be explained solely by a lack of forces. It must have deep political and methodological roots.

What are these roots? That is the question. Foster sees this delay of the Marxists mainly as a result of the polarisation between the mechanistic and positivist interpretation of Marxism, on the one hand, and the more creative 'Western Marxism', on the other hand, which, as a reaction, broke with Marx's and Engels' interest in natural sciences. This lack of interest in natural sciences is obviously an important part of the explanation, but is it enough? I do not think so. In the case of our current, the Fourth International, in my view, there is another element: that we did not draw all the conclusions from our own analysis of the capitalist crisis as a broad, systemic crisis of civilisation. When we thought that revolution could triumph in Europe, at the end of the sixties and in the first years of the seventies, environmental demands appeared as too immediate, too partial and secondary compared to social demands (with the exception of the fight against nuclear power, that we supported from the beginning). Later, when the relation of forces radically changed in favour of the ruling class, the opposite became true: the working class was carrying out defensive struggles for immediate demands, but at the same time the ecological crisis appeared more and more as a huge global problem, that could only be solved (from our point of view) through a global, socialist

transformation of society, on a world scale. In both cases, too narrow a conception of the class struggle and a unilateral, inadequately dialectical understanding of the making of class consciousness, led to a political orientation where the capitalist destruction of the environment was seen mainly as a topic for socialist propaganda, not for action, not for mass struggle, not for immediate and transitional demands.

This gives us some substantial indications about the necessary changes in our political message, programme and activity. As Martha Gimenez wrote, 'it is important that Marxists do more than engage in theoretical critique. They should be involved in specific struggles, learning from their experiences and sharing their learning with those whose views may be different but whose political goals might be the same'. [1] To deserve the label 'ecosocialist':

1. We should banish the purely propagandist approach to ecological questions, based on a mere denunciation of capitalism. Instead, we should improve our knowledge of the problems, not only in their social but also in their scientific dimensions (the latter being partly independent of the first);

2. We should help to build broad mobilisations on ecological demands and learn from others. In my view, the absolute priority from this point of view is the building of a world mass movement in favour of social and equal solutions to stop climate change (and adapt to it because it is already here). Nonetheless, the challenge of climate change illustrates the adequacy of Marx's concept: capitalism destroys the climate because its logic of accumulation unbalances the exchange of matter through a huge saturation of the carbon cycle.

In my view, one of our contributions to mass mobilisation should be to raise environmental issues in the workers' movement. In order to do that, Paul Burkett's point, in his excellent Marx and Nature, [2] that the human workforce must be seen as a natural resource exploited by capitalism like other resources, is methodologically very important. It provides the basis for the red and green anti-capitalist confluence.

Capitalist and ecosocialist responses to climate change

If we change in that way - and what is being done in Britain is an example - it will be very, very useful, not only for the workers and the poor worldwide, but also for the environment. Those who have doubts should have a glance at the Stern Report on the Economics of Climate Change. It is the first time that a team of economists mandated by a government has provided a long-term and global plan based on the scientific evidence of the frightening threats of climate change. Some environmental organisations reacted with great enthusiasm. But what are Stern's responses to what he himself characterizes as 'the biggest market failure ever seen'? A carbon pricing system to be paid by the people. A carbon tax paid by the people with the bosses compensated by a cut in 'social costs'. A global carbon trading system based on the European Trading System, which made the British power-generation sector alone a profit of around £800m in the first year. No limits to CDM projects that allow multinationals to lower the price of carbon while not reducing their own emissions in developed countries. In particular, more industrial, anti-ecological tree-plantations in the South, instead of emission reductions in the North. Free trade for low-carbon products. More nuclear power stations. A valuation of human life and ecosystems mainly based on the so-called 'willingness to pay' - that is to say on social inequality. In short, Stern's response to 'the biggest market failure ever seen' is... more market, more capitalist growth, more neo-liberal policy. The ecological efficiency of this strategy is doubtful. But it is crystal clear it will make the fight against climate change most unpopular among workers, peasants and poor, all around the world who will be the ones to pay.

Another response to climate change is necessary, a social and equitable one, with less market and more regulation, less competition and more collaboration. It implies the personal commitment of each of us, especially in the developed countries. It implies public initiatives to insulate dwellings, free publicly-owned passengers transport, public rail transportation instead of private road transportation, a battle against privatisation in the energy sector, massive deployment of renewables independently of the costs, nationalisation of renewable energy sources, land reform and the cancellation of the Third World debt, cancellation of unnecessary and energy-intensive activities like the production of weapons, etc. It implies a great redistribution of wealth, worldwide. It implies an ecosocialist perspective.

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P.S.

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<http://www.isg-fi.org.uk/spip.php?article433>

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Footnotes

[1] Martha E. Gimenez, 'Does Ecology Need Marx?', Monthly Review, January 2001.

[2] Paul Burkett, Marx and Nature: a Red and Green Perspective, 1999.