
LETTERS

The publication of Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology* and the ensuing discussion in the June, 2001 issue of *CNS* raise questions which are of considerable intellectual importance. But they do little to help us find practical policies to solve our pressing environmental problems. One must, of course, beware of demanding of authors that they should have written a different text. But at the present stage of history the situation demands it. As Mészáros has recently reiterated, it really is “socialism or barbarism.”

What is needed is theory at a lower level of abstraction than that introduced by Foster's argument. We need to be able to prove to all those worried about the state of the environment that long-term solutions to particular problems and a sustainable environment require a socialist society. This involves at least two steps. Environmental degradation must be shown to be implicit in a capitalist economy; and we must be able to present a vision of socialism very different from that offered by the USSR and other Communist Party-dominated countries, and also from that of the “welfare states” of the post-World War II Labour/Social Democratic Party governed countries.

The responsibility for providing a new vision, the necessary explanations, and then the steps by which we might move towards that vision before it is too late, lie squarely with those who today consider themselves socialist. For too long we have been content to repeat generalizations: Marx's formulations like “rich human beings with rich human needs” (Michael Lebowitz, *Monthly Review*, 53, 2, p. 45). Equally uninspiring is the Socialist Alliance call for “State ownership, directed planning and regulation of centralized infrastructure industries.” The “dialectical conception of natural history” (Foster, p. 19) many Greens already have. But they, and we (socialists), lack agreement that it is the nature of capitalism which makes the destruction of the environment, biological and other, inevitable. We also lack agreement on just what a socialist program to remedy this would involve.

Victor Wallis, in what he called a “preliminary discussion,” put forward some ideas of, and problems of transition to, an “ecological socialism” (*CNS*, 12, 1, March, 2001). He stressed the need for a “persuasive synthesis” (p. 129) of ecological and socialist goals which are currently separate. He began his discussion of socialism by posing

the goal as bringing about “a society free of class divisions” (pp. 128 and 133). While I agree that this is fundamental, I would prefer to begin by clarifying the distinction between a capitalist society whose goals are the production and appropriation of exchange value (mentioned by Wallis in terms of corporations aiming to maximize profits) and a socialist society where production is motivated by use. It is already obvious to many who are not socialist that much environmental damage stems from the insatiable drive for profit. What is less obvious is that a society could run on other than commodity production lines.

I would like to see this question linked with a really concrete discussion of the difficulties of a grass-roots democratic society, both as a long-term goal and as to the difficulties to be experienced in getting there. To say, as Wallis does, that “worker-control arrangements would eliminate the threat of unemployment which is used by capital to pit workers against environmentalists” (p. 131) is only part of the problem. Worker-control is a concept which normally applies to individual work places. The elimination of unemployment involves a much wider range of decision-making: regional, national and international. To be really persuasive the problems and possible solutions need to be explored with concrete example.

The question of education, which Wallis mentions in connection with the reduction of “wasteful consumption of resources and energy” (p. 135) is certainly the key to popularizing an eco-socialist vision. But currently the most effective purveyors of moral-political education are the public relations firms and advertising agencies, acting through the mass media and conveying quite a different vision. The ability of more democratic educators to reach an audience is severely restricted, in some cases by direct censorship, more often by indirect ways, and the Left’s lack of financial-material resources. Ecological socialists must first of all be able to show in concrete terms that an alternative to capitalism would work. Only then would Wallis’ call for “intense education and organizing” be inspiring. Only then could they formulate the steps by which the ongoing defensive and reactive protests (trade union, etc.) could move us in a socialist direction.

Victor Wallis concluded his discussion of how we might achieve an ecological socialism by posing the need for “something in the nature of a political party” (p. 145). A vital step in the discussion is to make the argument for this much more concrete. — **Ronald F. Price**, La Trobe University, Melbourne

I welcome Ronald Price's reminder that my discussion of ecological socialism, in which I try to show the ultimate inseparability of "red" and "green" objectives, relates to the issues raised by John Foster's work.

I would preface my remarks by saying that Price's proposed goal of "a society where production is motivated by use" is at one with my expressed goal of a society free of class divisions. It is precisely the capitalist drive for profit-maximization — a class-specific phenomenon — that stands most in the way of prioritizing use-values. The socialist approach properly understood, as I argue, incorporates the requirement of thoroughgoing democracy at every level. This in turn constitutes the most effective check on any possible re-imposition of profit-oriented criteria over criteria of human need. As for demonstrating that such an arrangement could work, one must refer to a number of human capacities or partial achievements. First is the general point that, given appropriate conditions, people are able to work cooperatively. Second are the actual successes of worker-control arrangements in certain settings.¹ Third has been the institution, in a number of countries, of services responding directly — and not through the market — to social needs.²

In relation to the Foster symposium, however, the most important dimension of my article is its central affirmation of red/green convergence. A particular aspect of this that deserves emphasis in the present context is my argument that, for practical purposes, the question of whether one pursues ecological goals primarily for their own sake (as in deep ecology) or primarily for the sake of human health and survival (the more common political concern) is irrelevant. The alleged antagonism between the interests of endangered species and those of human beings is artificially fabricated. Business makes people's jobs depend on short-term profit, which cannot respect nature. It then trumpets the stark alternative (e.g., "owls vs. people"), in a hypocritical attempt to invoke human concerns on behalf of what are really the interests of capital.

Sadly, something rather like this fictitious antagonism seems now to have been injected into what should have been a discussion among

¹See, for example, Juan G. Espinosa and Andrew S. Zimbalist, *Economic Democracy: Workers' Participation in Chilean Industry, 1970-1973* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).

²See, for example, the report on alternative healthcare institutions in Part 2 of Victor W. Sidel and Ruth Sidel, *A Healthy State*, revised edition (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

friends. It appears most conspicuously in the very title that has been given to this symposium. Why should it be assumed that there is an either/or relationship between Marx's ("red") Ecology and Ecological ("green") Marxism? Is not *Marx's Ecology*, whatever its achievements and whatever its limitations, the groundwork out of which Ecological Marxism has evolved? John Foster's book argues in great detail for a major extension and deepening of what was previously thought to be the scope of Marx's own ecological awareness. One would have thought that this would earn him a respectful hearing among Ecological Marxists, perhaps on the model of earlier *CNS* symposia (#35 and #42), in which a range of commentaries is solicited and in which the original author's response is published in the same issue. Here, by contrast, we have a set of uniformly hostile critiques (following an earlier hostile book review), and the only opportunity for the author to respond is in the next [September] issue, with a very tight deadline (presumably to facilitate immediate rejoinders by the same commentators).

Foster indicated to the Editors that he was declining to respond "at this time,"³ I hope that *CNS* readers will have the opportunity to read his thoughts at some later date. In the meantime, within severe space-limitations, Paul Burkett calls attention to the variously tangential, arcane, and misdirected aspects of the critiques (I was not shown any of the rejoinders), and Jason Moore offers ideas building on Foster's work, that suggest some of its richness.

In my own view, Foster's signal achievement is to undercut certain major negative stereotypes of Marx that are still common among progressive and green activists. Beyond emphasizing Marx's early interest in natural philosophy, Foster shows the continuous integration of natural-scientific with social-scientific inquiry throughout Marx's career. In particular, he brings out the centrality of the society-nature relationship to Marx's critique of capital. Referring extensively to Marx's early writings, Foster refutes the widely held view of the "Promethean" Marx as a one-sided apostle of modernization. Most interestingly, he sheds new light on Marx's famous phrase "the idiocy of rural life," placing it in the context of a broader, dialectical approach to the complementarity of town and country. Foster's Epilogue sketches the often suppressed green strand of Marxism up to the present.

³From Foster's email message to *CNS*, May 8, 2001 (copy sent to me by Foster, replying to my inquiry about the circumstances of his non-response).

Foster's work certainly calls for critical analysis. Especially in retrospect, it seems clear that he would have been well advised to devote more explicit attention to the body of green theory that he hoped to enrich by his findings. His passing references to its limitations are obviously insufficient. This lacuna, however, does not justify dismissal of his larger insights; it only underlines the importance of hearing what he would now wish to add. — **Victor Wallis**, Berklee College of Music, Boston

