

Marx's Ecology and the Limits of Contemporary Ecosocialism

By Paul Burkett

In *Marx's Ecology*, John Bellamy Foster begins the task of synthesizing historical materialism and ecology. “Begins,” because his is the first serious historical-intellectual analysis of the role of ecological concerns in the development of the materialist approach to human society. Foster’s analysis contrasts with the predominant practice of contemporary ecosocialism, which suffers from three features: (1) appeals to non-holistic readings of classical Marxism that have the effect of imposing “modern” ecological criteria on historical materialism without conducting an immanent critique of either historical Marxism or the ecological criteria themselves; (2) an inability to distinguish the materialist approach to human society and nature from particular analytical concepts and results (e.g., models of economic and/or ecological crisis) — with the result that the specificity of historical materialism as ontology and method is bypassed, deemphasized, or trivialized; (3) a tendency to identify ecosocialist theorizing with the grafting together of theories and concepts into new grand schemas of nature-society relations, again without the immanent critique needed to achieve a transcendent unity-in-difference of theory and practice.

The recent *CNS* symposium on *Marx's Ecology* exhibits all three of the features just mentioned.¹ As a result, it sows much confusion concerning what Foster’s book is all about.

De Kadt and Engel-Di Mauro argue that Foster: (1) imposes modern ecological concepts back into the 1800s in general and onto Marx and Engels in particular; (2) ignores major historical developments in the theory and practice of ecology — thereby overstating the contributions of Marx and Engels; (3) falsely criticizes contemporary Green theory by conflating and homogenizing the wide variety of ecological perspectives.

¹“Marx’s Ecology or Ecological Marxism?,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 12, 2, 2001, with contributions by Maarten de Kadt and Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro, Alan Rudy, Costas Panayotakis, and Joel Kovel. All page citations in the present text refer to this symposium.

The first criticism is based largely on terminological quibbling (e.g., the absence of the term “ecology” from Marx’s *Capital*) and an undialectical conception of scientific “progress” as a kind of uni-linear accumulation of knowledge by a free-floating scientific community. (“Thinking about nature was then at a relatively early stage, and because of advances in physical, natural and social science, such thinking is qualitatively different now.” [p. 50]). But when Foster speaks of “Marx’s ecology” he is referring largely to Marx’s analysis of the ecology of capitalism (and projections of the ecology of communism), and although capitalism was still young in Marx’s time it *was* capitalism. So it is not clear why Marx could not have had serious ecological concerns unless we view the development of such scientific concerns out of historical context. More to the point, it is ironic that de Kadt and Engel-Di Mauro accuse Foster of projecting modern ecology back onto Marx, and then proceed to evaluate Marx’s ecology precisely by such backward projections.

The last irony links up with de Kadt and Engel-Di Mauro’s second criticism, which seems to presume that the purpose of Foster’s book is to show that Marx and Engels provide a complete and readily applicable ecological analysis of contemporary capitalism and a quick and ready guide to revolutionary socio-ecological praxis — with no need for further scientific work. Nothing could be further from the truth. Foster’s main purpose is not to derive a blueprint for socialist ecology directly from Marx and Engels, but to show the crucial role of ecological concerns in the early development of historical materialism as a basis for an ecological critique of historical Marxism — the latter critique being only begun in the book’s epilogue — *and* for an immanent historical materialist critique of contemporary ecology.

In treating *Marx’s Ecology* as an indiscriminate attack on contemporary ecological analysis (their third criticism), de Kadt and Engel-Di Mauro bypass this underlying purpose of Foster’s analysis. Foster’s goal is not to fully document the weaknesses of contemporary Green theory but rather to develop — by way of a historical-intellectual reconstruction of the ecological element in historical materialism — a useful basis for a critique of Green theory and for the development of a Green-Red synthesis. Their misplaced emphasis helps explain why de Kadt and Engel-Di Mauro misunderstand the concept of “metabolic rift” and its role in Marx and Engels’ analysis of capitalism. For de Kadt and Engel-Di Mauro, the metabolic rift is a specific analysis identifiable as the material interaction of town and country under capitalism — which explains why they feel comfortable criticizing it as merely a simplistic and out-of-date version of more advanced analyses developed by “the

‘new ecology’ of the 1990s” (p. 54). But in Marx and Engels — and this is a central point of Foster’s book — the concept of metabolic rift is developed at the more basic level of capitalism’s fundamental class relation. “Marx employed the concept of a ‘rift’ in the metabolic relation between human beings and the earth,” Foster suggests, “to capture the material estrangement of human beings within capitalist society from the natural conditions which form the basis for their existence.”² The antithesis between town and country was a historically contingent application or outgrowth of the more fundamental materialist conception defined by the metabolic rift. In short, de Kadt and Engel-Di Mauro’s critique illustrates the above-mentioned tendency of contemporary ecosocialism to deemphasize historical materialism as ontology and method in favor of particular “modern” ecological analyses.

The same difficulty afflicts Rudy’s argument that Foster tries to “broadly equate ecology with... ‘the metabolic rift’” and that “this does a major disservice to ecology” (p. 56). Rudy also reduces the metabolic rift to the “tension between ...country and city” (p. 57). This helps explain two curious features of his argument. First, Rudy arbitrarily delimits Marx’s analysis of the tension between town and country, as if it is somehow incapable of further development to take various factors into account. Hence, Rudy condemns the “metabolic rift” for not explaining the full variety of urban-rural interactions across capitalist history, and — most unfortunately — for being incapable of handling intra-rural patterns of ecological despoliation from unhealthy circulations of organic matter (pp. 57-58).³ In this way, the potential

²*Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), p. 163.

³“Most unfortunately,” because such intra-rural patterns are a key focus of recent work by Foster and Fred Magdoff, based solidly on the metabolic rift approach. See “Liebig, Marx and the Depletion of Soil Fertility: Relevance for Today’s Agriculture,” *Monthly Review*, 50, 3, 1998, pp. 1-16. Incidentally, Rudy’s charge that Foster’s interpretation of the metabolic rift treats “ecological space” as “passive” and “effectively unchanged” by production “except for the (negative) consequence of the socially produced metabolic rift” is incorrect (p. 59). Foster’s account emphasizes the ecological problems resulting from capital’s attempt to accelerate production time regardless of the natural rhythms required by the organic conditions of agriculture — and similar for other natural conditions bound up with capital’s industrialization of town and country. No “passivity” of nature as a producer of use values is presumed here, and the contrary ascription is in fact one of the most common vulgar and closed-minded ecological critiques of Marx. See, on this point, Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), Chapters 3, 8, and 9.

contribution of the metabolic rift approach (as ontology and method) is bypassed in favor of an uncritical backward projection of subsequent analytical developments onto Marx and Engels' town-country analysis.

Second, Rudy suggests that a "limitation to Marx's ecology...is that Marx did not theorize the 'metabolic rift' as an important moment in the crisis tendencies of capitalism" (p. 61). This is doubly wrong. On the basis of his metabolic rift approach to capitalism's class relations and competition, Marx showed how the tension between the quantitatively unlimited goal of capital accumulation and the naturally limited organic conditions of raw materials production could and would produce accumulation crises from rising costs and falling profits. At the same time, Marx did not economistically reduce capitalism's crisis tendencies to profitability problems. For Marx, the fundamental contradiction of capitalism is not accumulation crises, but rather the contradiction between production for profit and production for human needs, between exchange value and use value — one based on the alienation of the producers from the conditions of production including natural conditions. Accordingly, Marx — and this is of course a main point in *Marx's Ecology* — emphasized among capitalism's systemic crisis tendencies the crisis in the natural conditions of human development produced by this system's sapping of the original sources of all wealth, the land and the laborer.⁴

Where did Rudy get the idea that the "metabolic rift" is not central to Marx's analysis of capitalist crisis? While part of the explanation no doubt involves Rudy's false identification of the "rift" with Marx and Engels' town-country analysis, perhaps the deeper problem lies in a misguided presumption (growing out of contemporary academic practice) that the proper purpose of the "metabolic rift" approach must be to provide a building block for new crisis theories. For Marx (and Foster), however, the primary purpose of the "rift" conception is to reveal the alienation of both labor and nature built into capitalism, *as the basis for* an adequate materialist and class analysis of this system *and* its crisis tendencies. Rudy's inability to grasp such a purpose is shown by his conjecture that "Marx separated his analysis of society-nature relations from his analysis of general communal conditions" (p. 62). But *the central point of Foster's book is that, for Marx, the alienation of the producers from natural conditions (basic to the capital-labor relation) is the root of society's alienation from nature under*

⁴On these two distinct kinds of ecological crisis in Marx, see *ibid.* Marx's analysis of the first type of crisis is also recounted in Michael Perelman, *Marx's Crises Theory* (New York: Praeger, 1987).

capitalism. This is the core meaning of the “metabolic rift,” as Foster repeatedly emphasizes. That Rudy does not see this shows the undialectical vision resulting from an ecosocialism that reduces itself to paradigm grafting and grand functionalist schemas.

Panayotakis argues that instead of investigating the role of ecology in Marx and Engels’ development of historical materialism, Foster should have grafted together the Marxist dialectic of nature (as represented by Levins and Lewontin) and Lukács’s dialectical conception of totality. By dismissing Lukács, Foster misses an opportunity to construct a more adequate conception of totality as a basis for a “reconceptualization of the emancipatory project” (p. 64).

Although Panayotakis’s research proposal is tangential to *Marx’s Ecology*, certain arguments he employs demand comment. To begin with, after indicating that Foster would have been better off focusing on Lukács than Epicurus, Panayotakis suggests that Lukács’s “concept of totality is still contaminated by the teleological assumptions of traditional Marxism’s philosophy of history” (p. 68). But one of the most important imprints of Epicurean philosophy on Marx, according to Foster’s narrative, was a strong antagonism toward all teleological conceptions of reality. In other words, any teleology in Lukács would verify Foster’s argument that the lack of appreciation of the Epicurean influence on Marx has been to the detriment of historical Marxism, and in this sense Foster’s project is both historically and logically prior to Panayotakis’s.

Equally curious is Panayotakis’s development of the purported complementarity of the Levins/Lewontin and Lukácsian conceptions of totality. Complaining that Foster is “more sensitive to Levins and Lewontin’s contribution to the concept of totality than to the contribution of Lukács and Western Marxism,” Panayotakis asserts that “many of Levins and Lewontin’s claims concerning science and dialectics are already present in *History and Class Consciousness* and other works by Lukács” (pp. 68, 66). Foster’s point, however, is not that Lukács and Western Marxism are undialectical, but that the range of phenomena to which they applied dialectics was more limited than that of Marx and Engels. Specifically, Lukács did not apply the dialectic to nature *as well as* society, in fact he viewed the application of dialectical method to nature as a concession to positivism.⁵ Lukács’s stance is explicable as a reaction to positivistic Second and Third International Marxism. One

⁵Georg Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 136-140; cf. *Marx’s Ecology*, pp. 231, 244.

result, however, was that the possibility of a more “profound understanding of ecological connections, including a coevolutionary perspective...was lost within the Western Marxist tradition,” with the Frankfurt School, for example, developing “an ‘ecological’ critique which was almost entirely culturalist in form.”⁶

Panayotakis’s attempt to uncover limitations in the Levins/Lewontin conception of totality (so as to justify the grafting on of Lukács) is similarly awkward. From a passage in which Levins and Lewontin contrast “the alienated world” with “the dialectical world,” Panayotakis manufactures the notion that they treat the distinction as “a purely epistemological one” (p. 69). But this criticism presumes that Levins and Lewontin either treat human (including scientific) practice as radically separate from epistemology, *or* crudely identify epistemology and practice. In other words, it presumes that Levins and Lewontin utilize (in a book entitled *The Dialectical Biologist*) a non-dialectical approach, rather than treating epistemology and practice as a unity-in-difference. Panayotakis’s concocted interpretation seems designed to downgrade the intrinsic practicality of Levins and Lewontin’s materialism, thereby drawing attention away from Foster’s emphasis on the practicality of Marx’s materialism and the key role of Epicurus’s influence in this regard. Given the similar emphasis of Lukács and other anti-positivist Western Marxists “on Marx’s practical materialism, rooted in his concept of praxis,” such attention would detract from Panayotakis’s one-sidedly anti-Lukácsian reading of *Marx’s Ecology*.⁷

Finally, Kovel argues that *Marx’s Ecology* suffers from a dogmatically anti-spiritualist and mechanistic materialism. The charge of anti-spiritualism merits only a brief response. Kovel never documents the assertion that for Foster, “spiritually driven thinkers cannot say anything interesting about matter and the philosophy of nature” (p. 75).⁸ For open-minded readers of *Marx’s Ecology*, Kovel’s reduction of Foster’s argument to a simplistic “syllogism” running from Green spiritualism and Marx’s materialism to “a monotonous and obsessive rejectionism” of all spiritual, including vitalist, thinking will appear as a gross trivialization of what is in reality a much more complex and balanced narrative (pp. 75, 77).

Stranger still is Kovel’s attempt to discredit *Marx’s Ecology* by artificially infusing Marx and Engels’ materialism with nature-

⁶*Marx’s Ecology*, p. 245.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁸This assertion is hard to jibe, for example, with the emphasis Foster places on Hegel’s philosophy of nature as a formative influence on Marx.

mysticism. Kovel partially quotes a passage from *The Holy Family* which, in the context of a summary and critique of Francis Bacon's materialism, parenthetically identifies Bacon's notion of "a vital spirit, a tension ...of matter" with Jakob Böhme's "Qual" concept.⁹ Kovel misrepresents the passage as depicting part of Marx and Engels' conception of matter, stating only that it is "given over to praise of Francis Bacon" (p. 75).¹⁰ He then quotes part of a footnote in Engels's 1892 Introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, where Engels quotes the *Holy Family* passage and briefly elaborates the "Qual" notion. Kovel poses this as evidence that the mature Engels continued to adhere to the same (really Böhme's) conception!¹¹ This textual torture provides Kovel's license to launch into a two-page lecture on the significance of "the mystic Böhme" (Engels's term) for the development of a materialist ecology.¹²

Kovel uses similar methods to defend the charge that Foster's materialism is mechanistic. In order to contrast Liebig's "vitalist" conception of metabolism with Foster's purportedly more mechanistic one, Kovel partially quotes a passage from *Marx's Ecology* summarizing Mayer's more quantitative-energetic notion of metabolism. Not bothering to mention that it is a summary of Mayer, Kovel says that the quoted fragment is "much more to Foster's liking" because it is consistent with "a reductive materialism along the lines of 'atoms and the void'" (p. 78, footnote 4). In this way, Foster's repeated emphasis on complex biochemical processes of metabolic exchange, that involve (human and non-human) organisms actively co-evolving with their

⁹Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1980), p. 158, emphases in original. The chapter in which the passage appears was written by Marx alone.

¹⁰Kovel does not mention Marx's immediate follow-up, which criticizes Bacon for treating "matter" as "surrounded by a sensuous, poetic glamour," and for his "aphoristically formulated doctrine" which "pullulates with inconsistencies imported from theology," *ibid.*, p. 159.

¹¹See Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p. 378.

¹²Kovel employs uglier tactics when he argues that Foster's praise for Carolyn Merchant is not only inconsistent with Foster's critical sympathy for Bacon (who Merchant attacks) but driven by a desire to "confer favor...to a scholar who, however green, obliged with a jacket endorsement" (p. 76, footnote 2). Here, Kovel rips Foster's praise out of context, failing to mention the qualifier pointing to Merchant's "one-sided treatment of the Baconian tradition." See *Marx's Ecology*, p. 259, footnote 32.

environments, as essential to Marx's metabolism concept, is simply bypassed.¹³ Indeed, Foster states quite clearly "that Marx's analysis in this area was primarily derived from Liebig," and that this "contradicts the claim that his analysis was neither biochemical nor organismic in nature."¹⁴ This is hardly an endorsement of "reductive materialism."

Kovel also coins the "reductive materialism" charge in terms of Foster's purported failure to incorporate the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Evidently Foster's materialism does not account for "the entropy principle of the decay of form" and its corollary that "nature generates form to be decayed" (p. 79, footnote 6). In reality, Foster stresses the "passing away" of (organic and inorganic) matter ("death the immortal"), the principle that "nothing comes from nothing," and the doctrine of no final (extra-natural) causes — there is only natural history of which human history is a part — as inseparable elements of Marx's world-view deriving in major part from its critical incorporation of Epicurean philosophy.¹⁵ The natural generation of form is thus central to Foster's interpretation of Marx's materialism.

Overall, the *CNS* symposium on *Marx's Ecology* sadly testifies to the limited vision and even closed-mindedness of contemporary ecosocialism. One can only hope that a more open and less academically insecure discussion will now commence.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 160ff, for example.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 36, 58, 114, 133, 225, 232, and *passim*.