

ECOSOCIALIST THEORY

On Marx and Ecology¹

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I am honored to be here to explore with you the relation of Marxism to ecological civilization. Although the title of this conference may seem obscure to the average person, its importance becomes clear once we realize that the phrase, “ecological civilization,” means civilization restored to sanity in its relations with nature. This is in recognition of the grim fact that our planet earth—including all nations, the United States, where I am from, and China, where we meet today—is undergoing a great “ecological crisis.” Though humanity is part of nature, it has become radically estranged from nature. This has introduced an exponentially expanding set of destabilizations in the ecosystems that represent our relations with nature. Whether expressed as climate change, species loss, pollution, soil loss, or any of the indices of a traumatized nature, the ecological crisis, unless creatively resolved, signifies the downfall of civilization and perhaps the extinction of our species. It is, simply, the greatest challenge to humankind in all history.

I put the matter bluntly to establish at the outset that this is not a problem that can be resolved through technological, administrative, or legislative means, however necessary these may be at an instrumental level. Nor is it my purpose to address particular political or economic issues, even though some parts of the globe bear much greater responsibility than others for generating the crisis, just as certain areas are more afflicted than others. Those reckonings are for another time and place. We need to focus today on the larger pattern, that the ecological crisis grows out of and reproduces a way of being rooted deeply in our history. Thus it is not primarily an economic problem, but one created by a civilization that generates a pathological economy, a kind of cancer on the earth. Its resolution, therefore will require a social transformation of world-historical importance, one that redirects society toward ecological integrity. Every locus of power in society—every nation-state, every corporation, every university, every religion, and indeed, every person—has the obligation to use that power to foster the ecological integrity of civilization in order to secure a habitable future for humanity and millions of other species. And if they do not, then humanity has the right and obligation to rise up and force them to do so. I am quite aware of how unrealistic this may seem. But what is more unrealistic: To face a difficult truth and do what one can? Or to go along with a manifestly suicidal *status quo*?

My thesis is that an appropriation of Karl Marx in relation to ecology is necessary—though not sufficient—for this project.² Marx of course never used the term, ecological crisis. The word ecology had just come into existence during his later years, and the generalized ruin of nature was not a looming threat. Nevertheless, in contrast to received

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² Much of this follows the reasoning of Kovel 2007, though the latter sections introduce some additional perspective.

opinion, Marx thought and cared deeply about nature and wrote brilliantly about many ecological problems, especially those relating to agriculture and the soil. Moreover, his basic category of production is inherently ecological, as it deals with the relationship between one part of nature—the human being—and the remainder of nature as this is transformed by the peculiarly human faculty of labor in the production process. Labor and nature, wrote Marx, contribute equally—though not symmetrically, as I discuss below—to the production of wealth; thus the entirety of civilization is nothing more, essentially, than different configurations of nature transformed by collective labor. In an important sense, which cannot be developed fully here, production and indeed, society itself may be understood systematically in ecological terms.

Further, Marx identified the dynamic responsible for the ecological crisis, although he did not do so directly, or all in the same place. In one of his earliest studies, “On the Jewish Question,” he writes:

The mode of perceiving nature, under the rule of private property and money, is a real contempt for, and practical degradation of, nature, It is in this sense that [in a 1524 pamphlet] Thomas Münzer declares it intolerable “that every creature should be transformed into property—the fishes in the water, the birds of the air, the plants on the earth: the creature too should become free.” (Marx 1843, 55.)

Thus Marx singles out the property/money system, which is to say, *capitalism*, as responsible for the practical degradation of nature; more, he shares Münzer’s (a leading figure in the radical Protestant Reformation) view that nature—all creatures, human and non-human alike—was imprisoned and must be set free. If this has a Buddhist ring to it as well, I trust you will not be surprised to learn that Marx, receiving a two-volume biography of Buddha in the mail, called it “an important work.” (Sheasby 2004, 55) In any case, Marx’s prolific discoveries in the economic sphere were consistently placed within a larger theoretical whole, one of whose implications is the avoidance of any singular or narrow lines of explanation. In the same spirit, we would note that Marx does not indict industrialization as the driving force behind the ecological crisis. Industry is not the effective cause but an instrumental means to the ruin of nature. It is, so to speak, the hammer wielded by capitalist society to smash nature, and is driven in this direction by the basic principles of its master. As to these, Marx writes colorfully in *Capital* that for the ruling class of bourgeoisie, it was “Accumulate! Accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets,” indicating both the leading dynamic of capitalist society and the religious fervor with which it is pursued (Marx 1906, 652). Capital’s dominion has a clear priority: its own accumulation prevails over all other goals and values, sacrificing nature and humanity to the gods of profit. Quantity rules over quality; and exchange value displaces use-value, to refer to key Marxist categories, and takes on an estranged life of its own. This becomes transferred to commodities as their “fetishism” and flows into the religious character of accumulation, which, unlimited as only pure number can be, drives toward infinity and drags the planet Earth to ruin.

The human world has always been troubled, and the history of the harm inflicted upon nature is long. But the trouble indicated by our ecological crisis belongs to the specific period of modernity, that epoch organized by capital’s hegemony. Only under modernity and its late-capitalist reflex of globalization have ecosystems on a planetary scale become debased. While writing this I recalled being greatly moved, long ago, by centuries-old

Chinese landscape scrolls in which human figures are represented as dwarfed by the magnificence of their natural surroundings. They were not reduced by this, however, but became enhanced through participation in nature. The prevailing mood was one of awe, tolerance, and co-existence. Chinese traditional culture in this respect is like all traditional cultures. All are unique, yet all share recognition of the greatness of nature and the awe with which humans beheld it. No modern society holds such an attitude today, and in this fact lies our doom. There are of course innumerable instances of “Nature Channels” on television, while parks and nature reserves dot the landscape along with New Age religious cults. But the key word here is “dot”; for these are the defensive and dislocated exceptions which prove the rule: that at the center of all modern culture lies the subordination of nature to “Man,” and with this, the reduction of nature’s ecosystems to instrumental resources, mere objects of its master’s needs and desires.

The reduction of nature has been accompanied by an ongoing disintegration of society. In 1848, Marx and Engels brilliantly observed in the Communist Manifesto that the newly dominant class of bourgeoisie has

put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors,” and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. (Marx and Engels 1848, 475.)

The term, egotistical, calls our attention to an essential feature of the capitalist world-order: that within its terms the Self, that species-specific quality of being human, acquires the character of being *split-off* from its ground of existence and, with this, from the other beings that populate nature. As a result, things fall apart, which is to say, disintegrate ecologically. As the Manifesto puts it:

[E]verlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned. . . . (Marx and Engels 1848, 476.)

Capital dissolves space and time, the anchor points of ecological integrity, and fashions human beings who have lost the sense of the sacred. Living under the sign of cash, they are turned into slaves of quantity and cold calculation, they become addicted to sensation, narcissistic, isolated, and disconnected from nature and the recognition of nature within and without the self. A population of this sort is essential for accumulation, inasmuch as people who have lost connection with nature are left essentially with two things: their labor power for sale on the labor markets; and their hunger, born of restless despair, to fill their being with commodities and serve in the legions of consumerism. Both of these are necessary for capitalism in its present phase, which overproduces commodities and must stimulate their consumption upon pain of collapse. All this generates the culture of modernity and takes place under the sign of the new.

The great Western Marxist Rosa Luxemburg in her 1913 study *The Accumulation of Capital* realized acutely that capital could never achieve equilibrium but had to constantly expand. In doing so, it has to “fight a battle of annihilation” against what she calls the

“natural economy” (Luxemburg 1968, 369). And what is this? Quite simply, every form of economy not predicated on the accumulation of capital, everything, that is, which is traditional and pre-capitalist. Colonialism, direct and indirect, internal and external, is the form taken by empire along with an everlasting war on all peasant, indigenous and subsistence economies. But to war on the natural economy is to build an economy that makes war on nature. Therefore capital combines contempt for tradition with contempt for nature, and pushes both toward the garbage heap.

Thus our inverted world: from humanity within nature to Man over nature. It follows that under these conditions, “Man” is also greatly reduced: unable to share in nature, and further divided by class, gender and race, systems where underlings are designated as closer to despised nature than their masters. Marx sees this in the terms of alienation, which expresses the estrangement of humanity from its powers to transform nature and make ourselves through our history. The necessary condition for this is for people to lose control over the means of production, whether through legalistic or violent means. And so the separation of humans from the means of production and the concomitant exploitation of labor alienates humanity’s creative power, and separates women and men from their human nature. Marx in *Capital* lays out the human cost of these glittering towers built by accumulation. For capital “mutilate[s] the worker into a fragment of a man, degrade[s] him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy[s] every remnant of charm in his work and turn[s] it into a hated toil . . . [and] estrange[s] from him the intellectual potentialities of the labor process in the same proportion as science is incorporated into it as an independent power” (Marx 1906, 708). By alienating the creative power of the worker, capital degrades her/him as a human being, and in so doing, degrades the ecosystems to which s/he belongs. The worker so mutilated—and here we recognize the whole of humanity under the sway of alienated capitalist production—becomes incapable of intervening creatively in resolving the ecological crisis, for this requires “the intellectual potentialities of the labor process in the same proportion as science is incorporated into it as an independent power.” The “dumbing-down” of the populace includes a dull-witted attitude toward the ecological crisis. It is greatly aggravated by the constant insecurity of living in capitalist society, ravaged by debt, deluded by mass culture, kept ignorant by the press, and cut off from a vital community.³

It follows that Marxism’s eco-political approach is quite distinct from standard environmental practice, as its prime point is not directly environmental at all but the transformation of the human element in the ecosystem through the empowerment of the associated producers and the overcoming of their alienation. To emphasize, this does not preclude environmental practices such as regulation or direct intervention in the non-human elements of the ecosystem (for example, by improving fertilization or irrigation, or employing renewable energy, etc.). However, the fundamental logic is quite different in its prime attention to human creative power rather than the things outside us in the environment.

³ Representations of the ecological crisis abound in horror movies depicting one scenario or another of the end of the world; they also appear in certain strands of Christian fundamentalism that corrupt the meaning of the Book of Revelation (properly seen as a critique of Roman imperialism). These instill a sense of eschatological panic and further alienate the capacity for contending with ecological crisis.

A Marxist approach to ecological transformation cannot rest, therefore, until and unless the capitalist system is surpassed and replaced by one restoring the control by the producers of the means of production. As this fulfills the power of human nature, so does it constitute the foundation of an integral human ecosystem. We shall then have, in the words of the Manifesto, an “association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx and Engels 1848, 491). It follows that an integral human ecosystem entails freedom: the self-determination, necessarily associated with others, of a dignified, integral life. A movement is presently afoot around the world, as yet very marginal but continually growing, to call this “ecosocialism.” Its key is conjugation of the socialist element with a fully empowered intention to heal nature and restore the integrity of ecosystem. We call its fledgling organization the “Ecosocialist International Network”; it serves as a kind of forum bringing together exponents of this new tendency and allowing for the exchange of ideas.⁴

A key principle of ecosocialist practice in a time when these potentials are still weak may be called “prefiguration.” It involves the dual recognition, first, that any socialist outcome is very far off given the hegemony of capital; and second, that it is possible to determine and choose between courses of action according to which contains the more vital germ of an ecologically integral future. For example, the politics of climate change include one set of choices organized around “cap and trade,” a means of creating a commercialized system of pollution credits, and on another side, a set organized around “climate justice” movements; these entail means of “keeping the oil in the soil” and are built around the needs and claims of indigenous folk who happen to be in the way of corporate initiatives to extract resources. Obviously the former is the province of capital, and the latter, of its victims. Hence the path of climate justice—a project grounded in class struggle—is to be chosen as prefigurative of an ecosocialist future. The same would hold, it must be added, for any practice carried forth in the name of justice. For justice, like freedom, is a necessary constituent of integral ecosystems.

I have used this notion, integrity of ecosystem, often, and it is time to look more closely into it. The notion of an ecosystem is a molecular concept within ecology: it is the place where ecological relations take place and are manifested. Ecosystems consist of differentiable elements, or aggregations of elements, whether non-living, living and non-human, or human, in an identifiable pattern of relationship. Since ecology’s central notion is the interrelatedness of all things within nature, the ecosystem is not unitary; it is rather connected both internally and externally with other ecosystems; indeed, from this aspect, nature may be regarded as the *integral* of all ecosystems. As in the mathematical notion, the integral has the fundamental attribute of being a *whole*, indeed such is the meaning of its Latin root. It is no simple matter to define the whole—or used as an adjective, to take a “holistic” approach: consider only trying to define what makes a certain arrangement of features on the anterior surface of a human head, a “face,” a whole different from the sum of its parts—and yet judgments of this kind happen “naturally.” So it is with ecosystems in general and especially those that engage living and human elements. However, we know ecosystems to be definite arrangements of matter and energy; as “arrangements,” they must be aggregations in which *formal relations prevail*. The universe began (if the term may be used) as a singularity entirely without structure. According to the best understanding known to me,

⁴ Further information may be obtained at <http://www.ecosocialistnetwork.org>.

it will end as a formless plasma. In between, in the world that we inhabit, forms appear, change, and evolve. Ecosystems are locations of form, and their internal and external relations constitute the unfolding of what is called evolution. In this respect, life appears as *self-replicating form*, and human being as a life-form capable of *consciously trans-forming ecosystems*. How we do this depends upon our values, our ethical systems, and our relations with the society into which we are inserted. In this sense the struggle for the integrity of ecosystem is an ultimately ethical imperative to direct human transformative activity so as to advance and preserve the holistic character of ecosystems. In the process, aesthetic and spiritual qualities emerge and signify evolution of one kind or another, according to theory/praxis (Kovel 1999). From another angle, we would say that production has to itself be produced. Some fragmentary aspects of this inquiry appear in what follows.

It is remarkable in this context that evolution, and for humanity, the struggle on behalf of integrity of ecosystem, occurs in context of that most inexorable principle of nature, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which dictates that in a closed system, entropy, a measure of disorder and formlessness, will rise over time. Life is at heart a struggle against the entropy law (Schrödinger 1992), and human production a never-ending battle as well, which the ecological crisis tells us we are losing insofar as civilization is dominated by the forces of capitalist production. But this also tells us, first, that as the Second Law stands, so to speak, over matter, so must matter—i.e., the physical stuff of the universe along with its energetic relations—be the locus of a countervailing tendency toward form and the sustenance of form. Otherwise, no-thing and no-being would exist. Hence what exists also resists dissolution. It must be added, therefore, that there needs to be postulated an *active formal tendency* inherent in the stuff of the world just as there is a tendency toward dissolution. An adequate vision of nature must therefore include the *presence of self-organizing potentials*. Matter cannot be regarded as dull, inert, and atomized substance lest we violate the lawfulness of the universe. Inert substance exists, but as a subset of matter: the already de-differentiated workings of the entropy principle, matter reverted to its entropically augmented condition, for example, a decayed corpse, leaf mulch, or the remains of a forest fire—but also prepared for resumption and re-entry into the cycle of being. This is not “vitalism,” since self-organizing potentials do not signify the presence of life everywhere in nature. They do signify, however, the potential toward life somewhere in nature, and as it must also be, consciousness at a further stage of realization.

A worthy ethic of production would be faithful to this property of nature, and configure modes of production accordingly. We would expect the same in a theory of labor, as labor is the dynamic element in production. In a famous passage from *Capital*, Vol. 1, Marx builds such a theory of labor. Unusually for him, this is framed transhistorically, that is, as a human-natural process, which will appear in all historical circumstances. The passage is lengthy, and we have space for only a few key lines:

Labour is . . . a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man *of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature*. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and *compels them to act in obedience to his sway*. . . . He makes use of the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of some substances in order to *make other substances subservient to his aims*. . . . Thus Nature becomes one of

the organs of his activity, one that he annexes to his own bodily organs, adding stature to himself. . . . As the earth is his original larder, so too it is his original tool house. It supplies him, for instance, with stones for throwing, grinding, pressing, cutting, &c. The earth itself is an instrument of labour . . . (Emphasis mine, Marx 1906, 197, 199.)

In one of the most definitive statements of his life's work, then, we see that though nature indeed plays a role for Marx, it is a highly asymmetrical and unequal one, and radically passive. Marx sees nature as an organ subordinated to the master's mind and an instrument of labor; indeed, the whole earth is seen as such an instrument and even a kind of slave. Though the worker is a force of nature, he is a force *opposed* to nature, and this opposition is chosen of his own accord, hence not just opposed to, but outside of, nature. Man, *Homo faber*, is purely active for Marx here, as nature is passive—indeed, it is hard to see how Man can be a force of nature, if in the labor process he acts of his own accord on a passive nature. Nature is not just passive, but dumb, inertly waiting for Man to be fashioned into objects of use to him.

It is a striking indication of how much work needs to be done in rethinking the ecological dimension of Marxism that this famous passage has drawn so little critical attention, despite its logical and ontological incoherence. More, it is anthropologically inaccurate, as it overlooks the great wealth, subtlety, and spiritual beauty of indigenous labor over millennia and across the world. And most remarkable, it is inconsistent with Marx himself, at least the Marx of the 1840s, of the *1844 Manuscripts*, and the author of a most interesting passage in *The Holy Family*, written in 1845. Here in the course of a survey of Western metaphysics, he and Engels pause to pay attention to the early 17th century shoemaker and mystic, Jakob Böhme. They write that:

Among the qualities inherent in matter, motion is the first and foremost, not only in the form of mechanical and mathematical motion, but chiefly in the form of an impulse, a vital spirit, a tension—or a “Qual,” to use a term of Jakob Böhme’s—of matter. The primary forms of matter are the living, individualizing forces of being inherent in it and producing the distinctions between the species. (Marx and Engels 1845, 151; italics removed.)

In other words, Marx at age 27 clearly grasped the point that matter, the “stuff” of nature, needs to have actively self-organizing potentials. That this realization is no idle fancy is shown by the respect Marx pays to Böhme, an enigmatic and mystical Christian thinker about as far as can be imagined from the stereotype of the hard-headed Marxist. (Birkel and Bach 2010) In other early works Marx wrote that Böhme was “a great philosopher” and “divinely inspired”; and Engels repeated and elaborated his praise of Böhme’s notion in the 1892 English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. In the 20th century, the Western Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch picked up this thread again and developed it into a vision open to a radically different conception of nature in relation to labor. Discussing the 18th century philosopher, Friedrich Schelling,⁵ Bloch sounds the heart of this conception. Schelling wrote: “We know nature only as active . . . philosophizing about nature means lifting it out of the dead mechanism in which it seems imprisoned, animating it with freedom as it were and initiating its own free development.” Here Bloch adds:

⁵ Though he was often dismissed as an Idealist, it is more accurate to see Schelling’s project as the bridging of the gap between Idealism and Materialism. He referred to himself as an “Ideal Realist.” I am indebted to Prof. Arran Gare for this insight.

. . . nor is human history . . . obliged to nature only as one that is past. On the contrary: *fully manifested nature lies just the same as fully manifested history in the horizon of the future* The more a technology of alliance in particular were to become possible instead of the superficial one, a technology of alliance mediated with the co-productivity of nature, the more certainly the creative forces of a frozen nature will be released again. Nature is no bygone, but *the building site which has not yet been cleared at all, the building material which does not yet adequately exist at all for the human house which does not yet adequately exist at all*. (Emphasis mine, Bloch 1959, 689-690.)

A “technology of alliance” implies an ecologically free and rational civilization as the transforming place between humanity and nature. The integral activity of nature can only be recuperated in a society beyond capital, which is being called “ecosocialism,” as noted earlier. In such a society, nature could freely express what Bloch calls its *co-productivity*, respected and valued intrinsically for itself, and no longer laid to waste and ruin as mere resources for the Satanic mills of accumulation. Between past and future, the present will become that zone within which prefigurative practices are developed toward the mode of production limned by Bloch.⁶ Such would be the province of a realized ecological Marxism: a Marxism that understands the laws of capitalist accumulation and also the way beyond those laws and toward an ecological civilization cured of the cancer of accumulation. In my view, Marx opened this path but then lost his way in the effort to comprehend the process of labor.

How are we to understand Marx’s lapse? It needs to be taken seriously, not so much as a prescription for how labor is to be done but as a setting forth of certain guiding assumptions which stay within, indeed reproduce, the limits of a civilization directed toward capital’s goal of generalized commodity production. Marx spent years in devising the structure of *Capital*, and arrived at a method—which he announced at the beginning of his *magnum opus* with a flourish of scientific self-congratulation—that saw the laws of capitalist production as “natural” laws which worked with “iron necessity toward inevitable results” (Marx 1906, ii). These laws depended upon the commodity as the cellular unit of society, and the two forms of value—use and exchange—as the organizing principles of commodity life. One might hypothesize that here Marx became the prisoner of a “scientific” methodology and lost the fluidity of dialectic. Thus he came to treat a limited phase of human labor as a universal instead of—as his own best insights would have ordained—a historical peculiarity that an ecological civilization could surpass. For Marx—and for the socialists who came after him—this was the horizon of reason—and at this one point, his genius abandoned him. Once the notion of an inert and passive nature worked over by an active Man became hypostatized, there was no theoretical reason not to move toward all-out development of the forces of production. In any case, neither Marx nor by and large the socialist traditions that followed were able to do more than partially transcend the curse of capital as it pressed toward unlimited production on a finite earth. It is not for us here to review the checkered record of actually existing socialism with respect to ecological integrity, either its important but partial and non-decisive exceptions (the early U.S.S.R., Cuba after 1991) or the extensive

⁶ Bloch subsumed his insight into a delineation of what has been called “neo-Aristotelianism,” a current of subversive metaphysics that embraces thinkers as diverse as Averroes, Paracelsus, and Giordano Bruno, and whose common thread was to embrace a concept of matter akin to that of Böhme. For a discussion, see Ely (1996). To my way of thinking, Bloch is the leading Marxist philosopher pointing the way to an emancipated vision of nature and a genuinely Ecological Civilization.

disasters and blind spots that have blighted its heritage. But ecological Marxism cannot afford to brush this aside.⁷

I would argue that ecological Marxism requires an appropriation of concepts such as Bloch's co-productivity of nature and technology of alliance. We might begin with thinking about certain forms of relations with nature and kinds of labor that point in this direction. Instances of this are as common as having dogs tend flocks of sheep or using the wind to sail a ship, or tending a garden—forms that the metaphors used by Marx in his passages on the labor process fail to convey. Think, too, of the all-important work of caring for children—and the “labor” of bringing them into the world: how is this to fit into “man” actively working over a passive nature? These processes involve, by contrast with Marx's dictum about labor, a *going-with* nature, a reading of its ways, and fundamentally, a kind of *receptivity* to nature (by definition, neither inert nor passive) as the foundation of an ecologically worthwhile labor process. Now labor is carried out within the spirit of being differentiated from nature and not split off and above it. With this comes a twofold recognition—of ourselves within nature, and nature within ourselves—that can be built upon for a realized ecological Marxism.

As prefiguration, the movement toward ecological civilization sets for itself the goal of breaking the chains of generalized commodity production. But this requires an additional theoretical perspective from that currently employed by political economy. Theoretical constructs are also the correlatives of living choices. And no theoretical construction is more directly related to real choices than the configurations of *value* by means of which Marx lay bare the laws of motion of capital. In this sense, use- and exchange-value are theoretical points saturated with real implication. Accordingly, capital is that system where the exchange-value embedded in commodities is made to dominate and overwhelm use-value. By contrast, we are accustomed as ecosocialists to *de-value* exchange-value (and its congeners, surplus value, labor power, and Value itself); and to *valorize* use-value as the point of entry of labor into nature.

If ecosocialism is, as James O'Connor was the first to emphasize, the struggle for use-value, we should be able, so to speak, to draw upon allies for this struggle. And if nature, as Bloch put it, enjoys co-productivity with labor in the process of production, then we may invoke nature, as what goes beyond the human will, in the search for such an ally. From this perspective we may say that there needs be something beyond use-value, namely, the *intrinsic value* of a vitally conceived nature, whose productive relations are suggested by terms such as “going with” and “receptivity” along with the twofold process of recognition mentioned above (Peterson 2010). In other words, nature valued for its “suchness,” and not for what we can make of it. Use-value is now triangulated with exchange-value and intrinsic value; and this configuration can be realized as a way of breaking capital's death-grip. It transmits

⁷ There is a lengthy debate on this subject, which I cannot take up here. It involves, among others, Alfred Schmidt, Ted Benton, Rainer Grundmann, John Bellamy Foster, and the Japanese School exemplified by Shimazaki and Takada; and has recently been ably summarized by Lixin Han, of Tsinghua University in Beijing (Han 2010). He concludes that Marx's notion of labor is more open to an authentic dialectic than I have argued in this contribution. I think this does reflect the potentials shown by Marx. However, it requires an extensive development and critique of actually existing socialisms. In any case, we should not rest with a mystification of Marx as having achieved perfection of ecological insight.

energy to the struggle for use-values even as it de-legitimizes the annihilation signified by exchange within the cancerous order of capital.

Intrinsic value is distinct from use- and exchange-value in not being immediately tied to production at all. It may be likened to the attitude of wonder with which infants regard the world. As such, it is impossible for us to live by intrinsic value alone.⁸ But it may be argued that it is not worthwhile to live without it, either, inasmuch as intrinsic value is the opening onto the aesthetic and spirit dimensions of existence. I discovered this anew while preparing this lecture. Thinking about going to China and wondering how a society so wracked by capital's expansion would yet have the audacity to propose a conference such as this, I was led to recall the landscape paintings I mentioned a while ago, and associated with the openness to nature deeply enshrined within Chinese culture.

A bit later this perspective became widened. I had been thinking for some years about the matter of intrinsic value without quite realizing what I was drawing upon. But then it became clear that this was the same doctrine—or rather, anti-doctrine—that the landscape paintings expressed. For the notion of intrinsic value is essentially the message of the Tao Te Ching, which was the ideology behind the landscape paintings (Lao-Tzu 2007). I had absorbed this many years ago; and though I had set it aside, it evidently had worked its way through my psyche, re-surfacing as a critique of Marx's latent productivism. Is not intrinsic value the lesson of *wu wei*: actionless action, primordial being anterior to purposive being, infant-knowing, knowing within the womb, a gentle scourge to all would-be dictators, the “soft” foundation of the world? Joseph Needham—a very great influence on me, by the way—wrote that the central idea of the Taoist philosophers “was the unity of Nature, and the eternity and uncreatedness of the Tao.” Needham also called Taoism a “materialist mysticism” (Needham 1956, 111) and declared it open to science. Its principle is to preserve the integrity of existence against all that would tear apart the world and make it a wasteland. No less a goal can motivate an ecological civilization.

Post-script

Some brief remarks are in order about a subject evoked by this discussion, namely, the role played by the notion of intrinsic value rendered in Taoist form as practiced by the leading figure of Chinese communism, Mao Zedong. Maoism is certainly distinct among the variants of Marxism, and it is tempting to ascribe this to the influence of ancient Chinese philosophical currents, of which Taoism is the most apt model. So far as I know (which, given my lack of competency in Chinese is not very far; and I gladly accept correction for any instances of ignorance in this matter), Mao never explicitly made this claim, though he professed admiration of Chuang-Tzu for singing and banging the drum upon his wife's death (Schram 1974, 227). Moreover, it is quite easy to see analogies to Taoism in Mao's belief system, which he dramatically imposed on Chinese society. The hatred of bureaucracy and economism and the coordinated affection for spontaneity; the veneration of the simple life and purity of motive, above all, a metaphysical sense of a transformative process which

⁸ And destructive as well, to take this line of reasoning into the extremities of “deep ecology,” insofar as these simply toss the necessities of production into the dust-bin. We value nature intrinsically because of our primordial grounding in nature; but nature as “human-nature” requires us to produce if we are to live, and this implies the use of other creatures for food, labor, etc.

vastly exceeds our current frame of reference—all this put Mao well outside the mold defined by all previous Marxisms, and is at least suggestive of Taoist influence.

A closer look discloses, however, even more radical divergences from Taoist doctrine, at least as I would understand it. Mao Zedong was an amazing person, and it often seemed, larger than life. But he was, well . . . Mao, *sui generis*, and no Taoist. The valorization of revolutionary violence, the extreme voluntarism (such as led to the Great Leap Forward), the fanatical shaping of a cult of personality—all this eventuated in a style of leadership arbitrary and capricious in the extreme. The Taoist leader is to exercise restraint in the veneration of a Way that is far greater than our comprehension; the Maoist leader takes this fact as a license for excesses of every kind and of which the common denominator is his own aggrandizement. As for nature, whose intrinsic value is the leading concept brought forward in this essay in the service of checking capital's cancerous expansion, I would have to agree with Benjamin's Schwartz's assessment that "Mao was committed to the nontraditional Promethean war on nature, and really seems to feel that he has found new ways to achieve this goal" (Ping-ti & Chou 1968, 379).⁹ Indeed, the category of nature, intrinsically valued, veritably disappears behind the screen of Mao's megalomania. Thus he took Taoism in precisely the wrong direction, toward the aggrandizement rather than the ablation of the self, and in the process ruined the notion of intrinsic value and lost whatever ecological potential may have existed in his Marxism.

This may be read in the efforts Mao made to revise the dialectic, which he derived from Engels. Mao grandly reduces the triad of categories—unity of opposites; transformation of quantity and quality into one another; and negation of the negation—into one category: the first, which becomes in his hands a cosmic series of transformations in which humanity is dissolved. Quantity and quality are seen as opposites to be unified; and as for negation, well, "this does not exist at all" (Schram 1974, 226).

I would interpret this as a kind of Nietzschean flouting of the modality of ecosystemic integrity, and in any case a recipe for disaster. Negation is a profoundly ecocentric concept that expresses the integral form taken by ecosystems; while negation of the negation represents the moment of creative intervention that preserves and transforms ecosystemic integrity. For Mao, however, the transformation of opposites is repeatedly linked to the notion of eating, as the Chinese communists are said to have eaten their adversaries the Kuomintang. Transformation becomes digestion, assimilation, and excretion, in a word, annihilation. Negation, which carries also the notion of preservation, is annihilated; the past is annihilated; the individual is annihilated; and nature is annihilated. Everything is consumed, nothing is preserved . . . And so it went for the Maoist regime itself, as this collapsed and, transmogrified, became the present species of uncontrollable capitalist expansion. A pure negation, we might say—and one that awaits its own negation: not to return to Maoist excess, but as the slender hope of a future. If the capitalist negation is not itself negated, what will be left when the present ecocidal system runs its course?

⁹ This is not to dispute that a great deal of tremendously important and often highly creative and valuable changes, particularly in the countryside, were midwifed by Chinese communism (Hinton and Magdoff 2008). Mao's influence here is incontrovertible, both as an enabler of, and tragic limit to, the transformative process.

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