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COMMUNISM & ECOLOGY

HUMAN EMANCIPATION & THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

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The struggle for human emancipation in the “Anthropocene,” the geologic epoch distinguished by the impact of civilization on the natural environment, is inextricably bound up with the project of establishing an egalitarian and ecologically sustainable economic order. In seeking to understand the evolution of human society and the possibility of realizing this new order, i.e., communism, Marx developed the materialist conception of history.

Marx did not engage in a moralistic denunciation of exploitation and human bondage in the abstract. Oppression is as old as class-divided society itself, and its historical origins have been addressed by theologians and idealist philosophers—but until Marx, no one was able to explain the material and social foundations of the appearance, persistence and eventual disappearance of class divisions.

Key to the materialist conception of history, and the practical project of transcending class society, is the concept of the forces of production. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels observed that humanity,



Poverty and privation outside a slum in Mumbai, India

at a certain stage in its evolution, began to produce its means of subsistence. Other animals do this to a limited extent, but production has fundamentally shaped our species.

Production is essentially the transformation of natural objects by human activity into useful things, aka use-values, or “wealth.” As such, it can be considered a process of “material exchange” or conversion occurring within nature. Momentum is generated in the first instance through the dialectical antagonism between the two sides of the exchange, i.e., humanity and the rest of nature. In his useful (albeit flawed) book, *Marx’s Ecology*, John Bellamy Foster correctly stresses the centrality of this concept of material exchange—or human-nature “metabolism”—to Marx’s materialism, and cites his important observation in *Capital* that “Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.”

The “metabolic” conversion of matter by human labor requires means of production. Combined with technique, labor power and forms of organization, these means of production are the basis of Marx’s concept of the productive forces, i.e., human capacities to transform nature. The speed, efficiency, form and purpose of the metabolic conversion, as well as its ultimate sustainability, are dependent on the complex interplay of the forces and social relations of production that together constitute historically distinct modes of production.

The history of the progress of human civilization, Marx argued in 1859, can be traced in the development of the forces of production through successive modes of production. “Primitive communism,” humanity’s initial mode of production, was essentially egalitarian in structure and its distribution of social wealth. But this was an “equality of poverty,” because the “primitive” productive forces yielded little more than basic subsistence, and humans therefore remained hostage to the vagaries of nature.

While the causes of the transition to class society remain obscure, it is clear that the material foundation of class division—with the attendant gender inequality and other forms of servitude—was the development of productive forces to the point that it was possible for a

tiny privileged section of the population to exist without directly participating in production.

Henceforth the drive to enhance labor productivity—or to increase the efficiency of the human-nature metabolism—was mediated by non-egalitarian social relations. Beyond the need to “master” the forces of nature in order to protect the community from predators and other dangers, a social imperative to develop the productive forces had also been introduced insofar as the ruling stratum sought to increase its wealth at the expense of the laboring majority, the “direct producers.” While this social imperative was deforming (and frequently counterproductive), the historically changing class-based logics of surplus appropriation nonetheless led to the progressive, if non-linear, augmentation of human capacities through what Marx described as the “Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production.”

Capitalism, more than any previous class-divided mode of production, has enormously accelerated the development of the material forces of production, but it has done so not to expand the quantities of use-values, but in order to maximize profit—with complete disregard for “wealth,” including the natural environment. Foster, following Marx, argues that the logic of capitalism (which is essentially anarchic and led by “blind” economic forces operating “behind the backs” of human beings) is detached from the material-human world on which it ultimately rests—leading to metabolic or ecological “rifts” through the same social process that Marx described as the self-alienation of labor.

Capitalism has taken alienation, exploitation and inequality to unprecedented heights while providing humanity for the first time with the possibility of eliminating these scourges through a fundamental reorganization of the social relations of production. In Marx’s words, capitalism has “create[d] the material conditions for the solution” of social antagonisms. While widening ecological rifts to an extremely dangerous extent, and thereby imperiling the very foundations of human existence, capitalism has also “created the material conditions” to repair those rifts, if the bourgeois mode of production can be eliminated before it destroys the environmental preconditions for human life on Earth.



Child sifts through discarded electronic components in a toxic waste dump near Accra, Ghana.

Ecology, 'Growth' & the Transition to Communism

Marxism provides a guide for the historical transformation of society through struggling for changes that both initiate the transition to communism and anticipate its early stages. In the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx brilliantly sketches a transitional period between capitalism and the lower phase of communism, which Lenin and others characterized as “socialism,” during which society will still be “economically, morally and intellectually... stamped with the birth-marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.” Nevertheless, the collective ownership of the means of production will represent a fundamental transformation in the economic foundations of society, vastly enhancing humanity’s capacity to control nature.

Capitalism is enormously wasteful, all the more so in the epoch of its decline, with an increasing proportion of human activity devoted to financial speculation, marketing, military expenditures and other irrational overheads that the “free market” requires. The reorganization of economic activity on the basis of a rational plan would immediately increase efficiency, re-

duce waste and dramatically improve the lives, and tap the energy and ability, of the billions of human beings whom capitalism has consigned to hopeless poverty and privation.

Marx projected that the continuing development of the socialist mode of production would ultimately result in full communism—i.e., a classless, stateless order—in which society will “inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” Yet as Marx explains in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, this will only happen “after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly.” The further growth of the productive forces is required to establish the material basis for the transition to communism. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels explain that to transcend the alienation of class society, the “development of productive forces...is an absolutely necessary practical premise because without it want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old filthy business would necessarily be reproduced.”

Many self-styled Marxists (including Foster) advocate a “steady-state economy,” and some even echo petty-bourgeois environmentalist calls for “de-growth.” These perspectives are premised on the notion that the ecological destruction wrought by capitalism is a product of growth per se, rather than the consequence of the pursuit of profit maximization and the anarchic character of production under capitalism. Like Foster, many socialist groups tailor their treatment of sustainable development to the anti-technological and anti-growth prejudices of the green activists they seek to recruit.

Capitalism has of course developed the productive forces without regard for ensuring the well-being of our species and its ability to co-exist with the natural environment. But even some of the more dangerous technologies and practices (such as nuclear fission) might be adapted to contribute to humane, sustainable development in a rationally planned economy in which the “associated producers” factor in the environmental effects of particular technologies in their decision-making.

Anti-growth advocates generally reject the expansion of productive capacity on essentially moral grounds. Some environmentalists even favor a return to more primitive economic models and propose that the population of the advanced capitalist countries lower their standard of living while those in the “developing” world should curb their expectations. Such notions are both reactionary and utopian, and have nothing in common with Marxism, which holds that only through the further development of the productive forces will it be possible to eliminate class contradictions and the unregulated, destructive interaction of humanity and nature.

In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx described communism as “the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.”

Proletarian Centrality & Revolutionary Organization

The historical agency for communist transformation is the proletariat—“a class with radical chains.” In order to liberate itself from these chains, Marx observed, the working class has no choice but to collectivize private property and reorder the relations of production in an egalitarian and democratic manner. Insofar as there is an identity between communism and environmentally sustainable development, a political project capable of effectively addressing ecological crises must have as its goal the seizure of power by the working class and the imposition of what Marx called “the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Yet many present-day admirers of Marx, and virtually all green activists, view this perspective as hopelessly naïve, if not outdated or even dangerous. While more pro-working class environmentalists sometimes put forward hazy calls for labor to take up the cause of sustainable growth, others are indifferent or even hostile toward working people, whom they disdain as myopic conspicuous consumers interested in maintaining the

polluting factories, mines, refineries, etc., in which they work. What is necessary is an approach that links strategies to redress environmental crises and the growth of social inequality on the one hand to a perspective of the socialist reorganization of society on the other.

This requires organization—a revolutionary party capable of leading the working class and other oppressed layers to fight for state power. Building such a party must center on winning mass support for a revolutionary program, i.e., a set of demands that constitute a basis of practical struggle to guide the spontaneous movements of the workers and oppressed in the direction of overturning the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and creating a new type of state based on democratic working-class institutions.

It has to be acknowledged that, with very few exceptions, even the best exponents of the Marxist tradition have paid relatively scant attention to environmental problems. In recent years the scope of ecological catastrophe has become obvious with an unambiguous consensus within the scientific community on the implications of anthropogenic climate change. Yet some self-described Marxists continue to downplay the dangers out of a misguided desire not to adapt politically to petty-bourgeois environmentalism.

Unlike mainstream climate activists, Marxists reject the idea that capitalism can be incrementally transformed into an eco-friendly system. This is not to say that revolutionaries should be indifferent to particular instances of ecological degradation—it is necessary to be actively involved in struggles to resist corporate destruction of the environment. Yet the chief responsibility of Marxists is to attempt to popularize the understanding that such destruction is a manifestation of the profound irrationality of the capitalist mode of production.

The necessity of the revolutionary transformation of society through working-class revolution has never been more urgent. Marxism offers the only realistic chance our species has for survival, because, in the end, the problems of human freedom and sustainable economic development are inseparably intertwined: both require the expropriation of the expropriators and the creation of a rationally-planned socialist economy on a world scale. ■

