

Totality: Decades of Debate and the Return of Nature

On how Marxism is the only intellectual tradition on the scene capable of embracing in an integrated and grounded way the whole of what needs to be comprehended to understand and cope with our world

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How is it that classical Marxist authors were able to address such a stunning array of issues? In the call for a recent conference on Frederick Engels, organisers suggested possible themes in exploring the legacy of Engels, suggesting class, gender, nature, science, religion, colonialism, capitalism, and socialism.¹ Many more could have been added. The same could be said of Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin, Nikolai Bukharin, and many more authors. What made it possible for them to encompass such a wide range of themes?



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Of course, many people discuss many things, but do they encompass them in a coherent perspective?

Quite often, they do not. There is a difference between scatty and systemic thinking, between eclecticism and synthesis, between pluralism and holism, between a ragbag of assorted notions and a coherent and comprehensive worldview.

It is systemic thinking, synthesis, totality that characterised the approach of the above theorists and continues to set apart the best of what has come to be called Marxism.

¹ ↪ This article is a revised version of a keynote address to the Engels in Eastbourne conference on June 2, 2023.

Totality is an ongoing process, not a static or finished thing. The verb totalising, rather than the noun totality, better captures its open-ended, always striving, process. It is an activity rather than an object. It is an orientation toward the whole, not a finalised conception of the whole. It is a way of thinking that endeavours always to understand each phenomenon within the pulsing whole and the complex nexus of its interactions.

There is a long history of controversy surrounding the concept of totality both within Marxism and in the wider intellectual culture surrounding it. My own version of that history that I propose to sketch here is at odds with the version many other Marxists would put forward.

The emphasis on the concept of totality is usually associated with that tradition that is so imprecisely designated as Western Marxism. As I set out to prepare this paper, I remembered that I reviewed a book called *Marxism and Totality* when it first came out in 1984.² I took it off my shelf and began skimming it via my underlinings and notes in the

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margins, many of which said “No.” Martin Jay subtitled his book *The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. For a start, I would not start with Georg Lukács or end with Jürgen Habermas (if I got around to including Habermas at all). Jay located his intellectual history of the concept of totality within Marxism entirely within the Western Marxist tradition, excluding

almost all of what I would be most insistent on including and including much that I would exclude, except by way of polemical contrast.

The Western Marxist tradition articulated a philosophy putting a strong emphasis on totality that started with Marx and skipped to Lukács and the Frankfurt School, fast-forwarded to the 1960s New Left, and continues today with a postmodernised version of Marxism, overlooking or deliberately excluding—even distorting—Engels, Lenin, and Bukharin, as well as all of Soviet, Eastern European, and Communist Party philosophy. The whole line of development of Marxism, what I consider mainstream Marxism, is either ignored or caricatured as diamat or vulgar Marxism.

The Western Marxist version of Marxism was the one predominating in universities when I came of age, but not in the movement in which I was also active, although it did make inroads into the movement too. In Britain, this could be seen in the pages of *New Left Review*, and eventually in *Marxism Today* as well. I initially and briefly leaned toward the Western Marxist stream, but then cast my lot with the other, precisely because I sought totality.

The Western Marxist tradition drew a sharp line between Marx and Engels, casting Marx as a profound, complex, critical, and humanistic thinker and Engels as a crude, reductionist, positivist second-rater. Sometimes, an anthropocentric Marx was extolled in contrast to a scientistic Engels, who was derided. It was alleged that Engels departed from Marx in moving from a critical method of social analysis to a *Weltanschauung*, an overarching philosophical system embracing nature as well as society and relying heavily on the natural sciences.

In my book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*, I reviewed the extensive body of literature examining the relationship between Marx and Engels and particularly works alleging that Engels took Marx in a direction they characterised as betrayal, travesty, deception, and delusion. I found no textual or contextual basis for these claims and made a strong argument for a basic harmony between Marx and Engels on philosophical matters, as well as a defence of

² ↪ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

the position of Engels on philosophy and science.³ Of course, there were striking differences in their backgrounds, lifestyles, literary styles, and thematic emphases, but they saw themselves as sharing a basic position and engaged in a common project, which Marx called “our work.” Terrell Carver has become a prominent and prolific exponent of the position alleging disharmony between Marx and Engels.⁴ He and I were the two keynote speakers at the recent Engels conference (Engels in Eastbourne, June 2023), coming at Engels from very different perspectives, although he understated his position on this occasion and I came on full-steam with mine. I am not going into all the twists and turns of that here, because there are recent texts that bring this long debate up to date.⁵

I think that the tide finally has turned on this and there is a rise in recent times of appreciation of the positive contributions of Engels, especially in matters relating to philosophy, nature, and natural science. I think that the Engels in Eastbourne conference was one of many manifestations of that.

At the same time, there are ever new assertions of the disparity between Marx and Engels, the latest being to counterpose an ecological and even degrowth Marx to a productivist and progressivist Engels.⁶ In the June 2023 issue of *Monthly Review*, John Bellamy Foster made the case against the assertion of Kohei Saito that Engels deliberately suppressed Marx’s reflections on the metabolic rift and its ecological implications in favor of his own approach to nature and natural science. Foster argues that there was no such suppression and that the positions of Marx and Engels on nature, natural science, and ecology are complementary and not contradictory.⁷ I agree.

I regret that Saito, whose important work in arguing for the relevance of Marxism to ecology, even writing a best-selling book in Japan on *Capital in the Anthropocene*, has brought back this nearly discarded debate about the Marx-Engels relationship and the harmony (or lack of it) in their views of science and nature. However, Saito does not deny Marx’s engagement with natural science and adherence to a philosophy of nature. On the contrary, he stresses Marx’s deep involvement in this area and growing realisation of the extent to which ecological destruction is inherent in the capitalist mode of production. Saito locates himself within the tradition that affirms Marxism as a philosophy of nature, as well as society.

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Basically, I think that Marxists should move ahead in dealing with the crises of our times by thinking in a way that is empirical, dynamic, and integrative without becoming too caught up in textual exegesis (although it is sometimes necessary). We do not have to justify every nuance of our analysis of twenty-first-century problems in the works of nineteenth-century thinkers, however much we owe them. Marx and Engels lived at a time when industrial capitalism was on the rise and delivering much that was progressive, while doing so at a terrible cost of social injustice and environmental degradation. Yes, it is possible to see in their body of work the basis of ecosocialism. Even if some passages pull in the direction of degrowth communism, we still need to think through a way ahead in terms of the forces

³ ↪ Helena Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1985), chapter 1.

⁴ ↪ Terrell Carver, *Marx and Engels: The Intellectual Relationship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

⁵ ↪ Kaan Kangal, *Friedrich Engels and the Dialectics of Nature* (London: Palgrave, 2020); Paul Blackledge, “Engels vs. Marx?: Two Hundred Years of Frederick Engels,” *Monthly Review* 71, no. 1 (May 2020): 21–39; John Bellamy Foster, “Engels and the Second Foundation of Marxism,” *Monthly Review* 75, no. 2 (June 2023): 1–18.

⁶ ↪ Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁷ ↪ Foster, “Engels and the Second Foundation of Marxism” – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, October 2023.

in motion in our own time. There is a complex debate, in which Marxists are playing a leading role, about the need to reprioritise production in a radical and sustainable way.⁸

As I see it, both Marx and Engels put great stress on the importance of the natural sciences and insisted on unity of method, firmly rejecting one method for science and another for life. Both rejected the nature/history dualism and saw nature as a whole in which humanity and its history are dynamic dimensions. Stressing the organic unity of humanity and nature, and doing so as if he foresaw the disastrous metabolic rift playing out in the planetary crisis of own time, Engels warned:

*Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature.... Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like something standing outside nature, but that we, with flesh and blood and brain, belong to nature and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.*⁹

To those who drew a sharp line between consciousness and nature, he replied that the products of the human brain were in the last analysis also the products of nature. He put forward “a comprehensive view of the interconnections in nature by means of the facts provided by empirical natural science itself...in order to arrive at a system of nature sufficient for our time.”¹⁰

Yes, Engels did extend a critical method of social analysis into an overarching philosophical system embracing both nature and society. He did not believe that it was enough to outline the political economy of capitalism, to put forth a vision of an alternative social order and to build a movement to advance that critique and that alternative. He believed that these efforts needed to be grounded in a comprehensive worldview encompassing all that exists, from atoms to stars.

I am arguing that not only Marx assented to this, but so did a whole line of unbroken development within the Marxist tradition. I am arguing, moreover, that this represents the best of this tradition, because it is the most coherent and comprehensive approach to conceptualising the world. It is the only path to a grounded totality. The opposition to it is riddled in myopia, contradiction, and partiality. There is no totality without matter, without nature, without science.

The tradition stemming from Engels, of which I am proudly a part, is a processive, interactionist, and integrative materialism. It is a philosophy asserting that nothing can be understood except in terms of its dynamic pattern of interconnections with everything else. It stands against static, atomistic, free-floating patterns of thought. It is a philosophy giving full scope to consciousness and will, but with full realisation of their inextricable materiality.

Throughout the whole history of thought, there have always been those opting for a disconnected and pluralistic way of thinking versus those who aspired to see the whole insofar as possible. Within the left, there have always been those pitching up for one or many issues but who felt no need for the intellectual connective tissue of an integrated worldview. I find this hard to understand, because, even as a child, I sought to grasp the whole and, as I developed, I found myself

⁸ ↪ See Foster: [“Planned Degrowth: Ecosocialism and Sustainable Human Development”](#) – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, September 2023.

⁹ ↪ Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1934), 180.

¹⁰ ↪ Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1946), 46–47.

puzzled by those who chose to bounce along from one thing to the next without seeking to see what I called “the big picture.” What I have found even more surprising was to find this even within Marxism.

This tendency was there from the start—first in direct opposition to Marx and Engels among their contemporaries. Then during the Second International, a number of its intellectuals reverted to the neo-Kantian *methodenstreit*, drawing a sharp line between history and nature and between the humanities and natural sciences—basically, one basis for science and another for life. Against them, others, such as Lenin and Georgi Plekhanov, argued for an integral philosophy “cast from a single piece of steel.”¹¹

In the Soviet Union in the 1920s, there was a lively debate stemming from differences in emphasis within Marxism on its roots in the history of philosophy, particularly the Hegelian tradition, versus stress on its grounding in the natural sciences. Still, even those most inclined to a more Hegelian version of Marxism defended Engels and dialectics of nature against the critics.¹²

In the wider Comintern, it was otherwise. Much of the debate converged around the publication of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923.¹³ It was a hundred years ago this year, and there are various commemorative events and special issues devoted to it. At the Historical Materialism conference in Athens in April 2023, there was a whole stream devoted to it called “A Thousand and One Nights of the Totality: A History and Class Consciousness Marathon,” although most of the papers focused on particular aspects of Lukács’s thought, and not the totality debate.

In his 1923 book, Lukács stated that the dialectical method only applied to history and society and could not be extended to nature, exonerating Marx and accusing Engels of doing this. Although Lukács had become a communist, he was still in the grip of both neo-Hegelianism and neo-Kantianism in such a way that he took totality from G. W. F. Hegel but dualism from Immanuel Kant, thereby becoming caught in a core contradiction. For Lukács, totality was a matter of consciousness, of phenomenological intuition, and a prior whole from which particulars could be deduced, not something that started with particulars and moved, both inductively and deductively, to totalling generalisations, as it was for Marx, Engels, and much of the subsequent tradition. Lukács’s work at this time was pervaded by a disdain for the natural sciences and the whole realm of empirical investigation, as was typical of the intellectual milieu from which he came. Lukács later reflected that this was a time when world-historical transformations were struggling to find theoretical expression and he found himself embodying conflicting intellectual trends in the process of his own political and intellectual transformation.¹⁴

The storm of controversy in the 1920s flared in the theoretical journals but also spilled over on to the floor of the Fifth World Congress of the Comintern, when Grigory Zinoviev went on the attack against certain intellectuals, naming Lukács, for theoretical revisionism. In a complicated story, Lukács recanted and remained within the communist movement, whereas the Western Marxist tradition took forward the position Lukács abandoned. It did so at a distance not only from the communist movement but from left activism, to different degrees with different thinkers.¹⁵ They tended to dwell in theoretical abstractions, in a world of ideas about ideas and texts about texts, not sufficiently suffused with

¹¹ ↪ Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*, chapters 2 and 3.

¹² ↪ Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*, chapter 4.

¹³ ↪ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1967).

¹⁴ ↪ Lukács, “Preface to the New Edition” in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*.

¹⁵ ↪ Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*, chapter 5.

epistemological anchoring of actual activism or empirical investigation. Although the proletariat for Lukács at this time was the bearer of revolutionary consciousness, it bore more resemblance to the Hegelian Weltgeist than to the living, breathing, working class of historical experience.

The Western Marxist tradition was caught in neo-Kantian antinomies, especially in the chasms between natural sciences and humanities, between nature and history, between matter and consciousness. Their totality was essentially an anti-empirical concept. They put great store on a critique of positivism, which was necessary, but they tended to conflate positivism and science and thus leave the whole realm of natural science to positivism, ignoring the existence of an antipositivist view of science developed within Marxism. They put a strong emphasis on consciousness and culture, often with rich and insightful analyses, but such analyses were always deficient because of their disconnection with nature and natural science. Their totality was always missing a crucial dimension.¹⁶

Western Marxism was a position largely held by university intellectuals, who considered themselves more sophisticated than those who adopted what they called vulgar Marxism, with Engels cast as the first vulgar Marxist and the Soviet Union and communist parties portrayed as the instruments of institutionalising this vulgarity. Ernst Bloch welcomed the Lukács book, but predicted that others would not, singling out Russians as not understanding the German philosophical tradition and thinking “like uncultured dogs.”¹⁷

The mainstream Marxist tradition—the one stemming from Engels and grounded in science—was also the position of some university intellectuals, many of whom were scientists. It was, moreover, the position of many working-class activists, some working on building sites all day and attending lectures on dialectical materialism at night. Sometimes, they were relatively unsophisticated, but not always. Sometimes they recited laws of dialectics the way children recited prayers and poems, but there were those who reflected seriously and even gave good lectures and wrote fine books. This version of Marxism was also a state-decreed orthodoxy and a position adopted opportunistically where communist parties were in power. Indeed, sometimes the work of serious writers, philosophers, and scientists was policed by apparatchiks, some of whom were thugs. These thinkers were not only criticised, but purged and even shot. Socialist societies took philosophy extremely seriously, but when the battle of ideas became intertwined with struggles for power, this could have unintended, and even disastrous, consequences. So, yes, this stream of Marxism could be vulgar, even deadly, but it cannot be reduced to these manifestations.

Lukács forged a path through these difficult times when polemics were interwoven with purges. For him, the concept of totality was the essence of Marxism. The problem was what kind of totality. There were and are many totalities from Parmenides to Hegel, including the monotheistic world religions. The essence of Marxism in the mainstream line of development is indeed totality, but it is a specific kind of totality, one rooted in matter and the empirical investigation of matter, a dynamic and integrative materialism. Lukács in his early philosophy was reverting to an idealism distant from matter and empirical investigation. It was a false totality, because it excluded nature and distorted history by failing to conceptualise it in its dynamic connection with nature. Lukács later admitted that the tendency to view Marxism exclusively as a theory of society and repudiate it as a theory of nature struck at the roots of Marxist ontology.

Lukács was committed to totality and to transcending the web of contradictions at the heart of bourgeois thought. He did shed much light on the antinomies of bourgeois consciousness. In his theory of the novel, he argued that the novel seeks

¹⁶ ↪ Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*, chapter 5.

¹⁷ ↪ Ernst Bloch, “Aktualität und Utopie zu Lukács,” *Der Neue Merker* (October 1923).

totality, but fails to achieve it, because of the characteristic fragmentation and dissonance of the age and because of the contradictory character of bourgeois existence. Without a worldview, he asserted, it is impossible to narrate properly.¹⁸ It was true then, and it is still true now.

What prevailed in the Soviet Union and the Comintern was a synthetic approach, which found perhaps its finest expression in the papers presented by the Soviet delegation to the International History of Science Congress in London in 1931. Before an audience accustomed to papers full of plodding particulars, Bukharin, Boris Hessen, Nikolai Vavilov, Boris Zavadosky, and others vigorously put forward a bold vision of the unity of science and its place within an integral philosophy encompassing all that was necessary to understand the momentous developments of the time. They also engaged in a robust critique of all other contending philosophical positions in the field, as well as the assumption that science could do just fine without philosophy.¹⁹

Some of the British participants felt that these papers crystallised all that had been stirring in them and struggling for theoretical expression. They pushed this vision forward in their own subsequent work and built a movement around it. Several of them were already world-renowned scientists who felt that the tradition stemming from Engels, Lenin, and Bukharin made sense of science in a way nothing else did.

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In the highly integrated mind of J. D. Bernal, science, philosophy, and politics were bound together in such a way that each could only be understood as part of an interconnected totality. The important thing about Engels's philosophy of science, according to Bernal, was that he saw nature as a whole and as a process. Bernal saw dialectical materialism as the basis not only for a revolutionary movement, but a force for the enhancement of science. It brought order and perspective to science and illuminated its onward path. Dialectical materialism was not imposed on experimental

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science from outside science, but was a method for coordinating the results of experiments and pointing the way to new ones—a method developed in and through science. It was a science of the sciences, overcoming specialisation and building a comprehensive picture of existing knowledge. There could be no coherence in science without a worldview, and there could be no credibility in a worldview not grounded in

science. Bernalism came under attack from many quarters, and he engaged in robust polemics against both positivist and idealist critiques of this philosophical position.²⁰

There were others, such as J. B. S. Haldane, another world-renowned scientist. His synthesising impulse—which extended beyond science, reaching for a theory of everything, from the falling of a stone to the imaginings of a poet—found a home in Marxism. A reviewer of his book *The Marxist Philosophy and the Sciences* noted that Haldane, on becoming a Marxist, rushed through the whole range of human knowledge, as if calling “Open sesame,” seeing everything in a new and clearer light. Haldane saw Marxism as the scientific method applied to society, expressing the

¹⁸ ↪ Georg Lukács, *Marxism and Human Liberation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1973).

¹⁹ ↪ I. Bukharin, ed., *Science at the Crossroads* (London: Frank Cass Pu

²⁰ ↪ D. Bernal, “Engels and Science,” *Labour Monthly* 17, no. 6 (1935): 506–13 and J. D. Bernal, “Dialectical Materialism and Modern Science,” *Science & Society* 2, no. 1 (1937): 58–66.

unity of all knowledge and analysing the same fundamental processes intermeshing into each other in every cross-section of nature and society.²¹ It was the same for Joseph Needham, who developed his theory of integrative levels under the influence of Marxism.²²

A contemporary of theirs who did not move in academic circles—who indeed left school at an early age, and later joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB)—advanced this vision of totality with science as an essential dimension. Christopher Caudwell read widely, constantly seeking synthesis. In Marxism, he found and advanced the integrated worldview he had been seeking. He wrote brilliant theoretical texts, published posthumously after his death in the Spanish Civil War. Whether writing about poetry or physics or philosophy, he had a way of penetrating to the very core, illuminating in a new way the whole vast web of interconnections.²³

Like Lukács and the Western Marxist stream, Caudwell put considerable emphasis on an analysis of bourgeois consciousness, but did so in a more grounded and integrated way. He showed how much more powerful was an analysis of consciousness and culture when pursued with a truly totalising orientation, one that comprehended where nature and science fit into the picture. He argued that the bourgeoisie had brought to a new level the dualism inherent in class society because of its illusory separation of individual consciousness from the natural and social matrices of its existence, thus generating in philosophy an ever-sharper separation of the individual from society, of history from nature, of mind from matter, and of freedom from necessity, making the fundamental subject-object relation insoluble.

Caudwell saw this contradiction as rooted in the social division of labor. Because the thinking class had become ever more remote from the working class, there was increasing intellectual fragmentation and cultural disorientation. Theory and practice were sundered in consciousness because they were separated in social reality, causing distortion of both. He explored the way this played out, not only in politics, economics, and literature, but in biology and physics. He saw every discipline tearing itself apart in contradictions that could not be resolved within any one discipline, but only within a larger synthesis. He saw the crisis in physics as a problem of the metaphysics of physics. Experimental science was generating a growing body of knowledge that could not be fit into existing theoretical frameworks. Science, indeed the whole of bourgeois culture, was unable to assimilate the discoveries it made and to control the forces it unleashed, because of the lack of an integrated worldview. This worldview could only be founded upon a new social matrix, one generated by the most enlightened elements of the thinking class as they made common cause with the working class, fusing their knowledge with that grounded in the life experience of the proletariat. Consciousness of the whole was not revealed in contemplation but forged in social labor. This is why Caudwell was active in struggles in the east end of London and on the battlefield of Jarama in Spain.

It is also why, I would argue, that political activism is epistemologically important and why there is always something lacking in those who define themselves as Marxists who never take it outside universities, journals, and conferences. A higher proportion of the intellectuals in the tradition I am outlining were active politically than those in the other tradition.

²¹ ↪ B. S. Haldane, *The Marxist Philosophy and the Sciences* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1938); Andrew Rothstein, “Vindicating Marxism,” *Modern Quarterly*, no. 3 (1939).

²² ↪ Joseph Needham, “Integrative Levels,” *Modern Quarterly*, no. 1 (1938).

²³ ↪ Christopher Caudwell, *Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) and Christopher Caudwell, *The Crisis in Physics* (London: Verso Books, 2018).

My own generation, on the whole, benefited from a rising tide, and many of us were the first generation of our families to go to university. However, this also meant many losing touch with the world of work, especially manual labor. The New Left often theorised in a way that was detached from labor, from economics, and from science. It was also dismissive of what earlier generations of the left had achieved and was hostile to communist parties and socialist countries.²⁴

In Britain, even those who became Marxists (even those who joined the CPGB) tended to dismiss this earlier generation of British Marxists and favor the Frankfurt School. They then rode the wave of postmodernism, increasingly attacking totality, economism, scientism, determinism, class analysis, and socialist countries, while celebrating pluralism, individualism, and consumerism, unravelling the whole that made Marxism what it was. Once I was speaking at a CPGB event in a polemic against these tendencies and arguing for Marxism as a totalising worldview in which science, economics, and class analysis were core. The chair remarked that she was astonished by my combative confidence, and various speakers from the floor denounced me for totalitarianism. They turned Marxism Today into a journal that it was difficult to consider Marxist, however broad the definition. Then they liquidated the party.²⁵

So much of this tradition unfolded in Britain. Marx, Engels, Bernal, Haldane, Caudwell, and others lived and wrote in Britain. Bukharin, Zavadovsky, and others put forward memorable presentations of their vision there. Jay's book dismissed in passing what he called "English Marxism," decreeing it to be insular and positivist with a strong distaste for generalising concepts. I think I have demonstrated how inaccurate that judgment was.²⁶

Meanwhile, there was an unbroken line pushing forward the totalling vision from the foundational principles outlined by Marx and Engels that assimilated new developments in science, economics, philosophy, politics, and culture, and entered into polemics against the detotalising tendencies growing ever stronger with every decade.

In my lifetime, one-third of the world was in the hands of states professing adherence to Marxism. I do not believe that being the official ideology of a one-party state was always healthy for the creative development of this tradition. It is definitely not the way of the future. However, we should not forget that, for much of the history of the world, those who ruled did so not only through military force, but by embedding their worldviews through ritual, educational, and governing structures. In those countries calling themselves socialist and institutionalising Marxism, some actively believed in Marxism, others passively accepted it, still others opportunistically feigned accepting it, and some dissented from it. When these regimes fell, some renounced Marxism, while others adhered to it in difficult circumstances, as their institutions were purged and closed down and they moved from influential positions to marginal lives.

Nevertheless, at all times, there were serious philosophers, scientists, writers, and even apparatchiks moving forward with this exploration of the philosophical implications of the natural sciences, some specifically in the area of ecology.²⁷ Even if the names of V. I. Vernadsky, Alexander Oparin, Vladimir Sukachev, Ivan Schmalhausen, Y. M. Uranovsky, Mikhail Budyko, I. P. Gerasimov, Evgeny Federov, A. D. Ursul, T. I. Oizerman, Herbert Hörz, Radovan Richta, and others might not have been so well known by the Western left, this did not stop its proponents from pre-emptively dismissing these scientists' work as vulgar diamat. Even now, many Western leftists show little interest in any philosophers of the East,

²⁴ ↪ Helena Sheehan, *Navigating the Zeitgeist* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019).

²⁵ ↪ Helena Sheehan, *Until We Fall* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2023).

²⁶ ↪ Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 4.

²⁷ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), 316–37.

except Evald Ilyenkov, Karel Kosik, or Bloch—those whom they see as having most in common with the Western Marxist tradition.

Those of us in the West who did take Eastern thinkers seriously and interacted with them often faced hostility, indifference, or incomprehension in the milieu in which we lived and struggled to earn a living. Postmodernism swept the scene and cast scorn on our totalities, disdaining our grand narratives.

At an academic conference in the 1990s, Terry Eagleton remarked that as a male middle-aged Marxist he sometimes felt as if he were a creature in a zoo where there was a sign warning “Beware: it totalises and reduces.” Nevertheless, we found places where our voices could be heard and our points made, occasionally even at the iconic heights of mainstream institutions. Eagleton was a professor at Oxford and Richard Lewontin, Richard Levins, and Stephen Jay Gould were professors at Harvard. Levins constantly reiterated that “the truth is the whole” and explored this in new areas, such as complexity theory.²⁸

By the way, I do not consider Althusserianism to be part of this stream emphasising the role of science within Marxism. Although it asserts a kind of totality and scientificity, it is more a matter of proclamation than practice. Its notion of science is abstract and sclerotic and not meaningfully engaged with actual science. Moreover, a totality without historicity is another false totality.

As to Engels and the whole stream developing Marxism as a philosophy of nature and science in continuity with a philosophy of history, I see a revival of this taking place in recent times. Kaan Kangal sees debate on Engels subsiding due to the demise of the Soviet Union and end of the old Cold War. Other authors over the years have also tied it to anticommunism. I do think this is a factor. However, there are other reasons.

Primarily, I believe, it is because of the ecological crisis of our times that there is a greater focus on nature, on human

Because of the ecological crisis of our times that there is a greater focus on nature, on human interaction with nature... Foster has played an outstanding role in this, combining major work in intellectual history tracing the genealogy of ecosocialism, while reviving Marx's theory of metabolic rift and applying it to the crossing of planetary boundaries in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

interaction with nature, and on the need for an integrated philosophy underlying that. There are many Marxists in this field now, citing the relevance of analyses of Marx, Engels, and subsequent Marxists in the past on the human-natural interface, while outlining the contours of climate change, biodiversity loss, coastal erosion, and the many symptoms of impending ecological disaster. Foster has played an

outstanding role in this, combining major work in intellectual history tracing the genealogy of ecosocialism, while reviving Marx's theory of metabolic rift and applying it to the crossing of planetary boundaries in the epoch of the Anthropocene.²⁹

Because the forces of nature press in on us so palpably, and because matter is still both so brutally and delightfully there—however remote intellectuals may believe themselves to be from it—there has been a kind of rowing back from theories failing to come to terms with nature and with materiality. Much of it is flailing about, inventing neologisms, recirculating old ideas as if newly discovered, or proposing weak and flabby abstractions where stronger and deeper

²⁸ ↪ Tamara Awerbuch, Maynard S. Clark, and Peter J. Taylor, *The Truth Is the Whole: Essays in Honor of Richard Levins* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Pu

²⁹ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

explanatory concepts are needed. Still wary of material causality and scientific determinism, these intellectuals put forward nebulous notions of rhizomes, imbroglios, bundlings, assemblages, affordances, mesh, hyper-objects, quasi-objects, whatever. I ask: Do any of these trends—object-oriented ontology, actor-network theory, posthumanism, or new materialism—explain anything that Marxism cannot explain better? The new materialism, for example, is a pale and emaciated thing compared to the rich and robust Marxist version.

Postmodernist Marxism may seem more sophisticated and contemporary by looking to Bruno Latour and bypassing Engels, but which of these really helps us navigate the terrain of our times, and which drags us into “an orgy in the mud”? This vivid image comes from Andreas Malm’s critique of Latour.³⁰

There are many debates both between Marxists and others and among Marxists. This is as it must be. There are many monumental matters at stake and fast-moving revelations of the details and scale of impending environmental disaster as well as future pandemics. The role of nature and natural science has never been so overwhelmingly evident.

However, the unfolding facts and forecasts about carbon emissions and climate breakdown, and of viral replication and vaccine development, cannot be understood properly without an integrative philosophy of nature and science and a political economy of capitalism. Only Marxism provides this. Within this, there are divergences about strategies for the left, with some moving from the concept of ecosocialism to degrowth communism. There are many contemporary developments to be addressed and alternative approaches to be weighed.

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My argument is this: Marxism is the only intellectual tradition on the scene capable of embracing in an integrated and grounded way the whole of what needs to be comprehended to understand and cope with our world. Marxism has developed this in an unbroken line from the time of Marx and Engels to now, even if the stream within this tradition doing so most credibly and comprehensively has been sidelined by both the dominant Western culture and other streams within Marxism.³¹

There is no totality without history, politics, economics, and culture.

grounded way the whole of what needs to be comprehended to understand and cope with our world. Marxism has developed this in an unbroken line from the time of Marx and Engels to now, even if the stream within this

At the core of this mainstream Marxist tradition was and is the real totality. There is no totality without nature, without science. There is no totality without history, politics, economics, and culture. Perhaps it has never been so challenging to pursue such totality because the detotalising pressures of the age are so strong. The dominant modes of thought in our time, various forms of positivism and postmodernism—now present mostly in debased forms—are both renunciations of the whole and plays at plurality, discontinuity, randomness, and fragmentation, and ultimately, meaninglessness, and powerlessness. Efforts to overcome this more often result in eclecticism than synthesis. Without laying foundations in an integrated worldview, one that is both materialist and holistic, they skate along the surface of phenomena and never break through to the core patterns of interconnection or the shape of the whole.

³⁰ ↪ Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm* (New York: Verso, 2018), 187; Helena Sheehan, “Between Nature and Society,” *Monthly Review* 69, no. 10 (March 2018): 59–61.

³¹ ↪ Helena Sheehan, “Marxism, Science, and Science Studies,” *Monthly Review* 74, no. 1 (May 2022): 35–48.

This is rooted in the nature of late capitalism: the system that masks the nature of itself as a system; the system that systematically blocks systemic thinking; the system that drives the disintegration that breeds decadence.

We live in a time of deep decadence, evident everywhere, from paralysis in the face of ecological crisis, to the capitulation of governments, universities, and mainstream media to power, to many manifestations of massive mental illness, to the empty noise of computer gaming, reality television, and the Eurovision song contest. The morbid symptoms and monsters multiply. Capitalism is decadent and yet still dominant.

What to do about it? The first priority is to see the shape of the whole clearly. The next is to speak and write about it clearly. The next is to organise around it. Marxists, from the beginning, have been doing this, and there is more than ever a need to do that now. We may be marginal in relation to the overwhelming forces of confusion and destruction ranged against us, but the margins are not nowhere. We need to inhabit them and reach out from there. Otherwise, the confusion and destruction go uncontested. There must have been times when Marx and Engels felt marginal to their times and all that was happening beyond their control. They had no idea what an enduring intellectual tradition and what a mighty movement would spring from their efforts. We need to keep this going, whatever future might spring from it.

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