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The Return of Nature and Marx's Ecology

an interview…

John Bellamy Foster and Alejandro Pedregal

John Bellamy Foster writes me before leaving Eugene, Oregon: "We had to evacuate. And we have to travel a long ways. But I will try to send the interview by the morning." The massive fires on the West Coast of the United States had triggered the air quality index up to values of 450, and in some cases over the maximum of 500—an extremely dangerous health situation. Forty thousand people in Oregon had left their homes and another half a million were waiting to flee if the threat grew. "Such is the world of climate change," Foster states. Professor of sociology at the University of Oregon and editor of Monthly Review, twenty years ago Foster revolutionised Marxist ecosocialism with Marx's Ecology. This book, together with Marx and Nature by Paul Burkett, opened Marxism to a second wave of ecosocialist critique that confronted all kinds of entrenched assumptions about Karl Marx himself in order to elaborate an ecosocialist method and program for our time. The great development of Marxist ecological thought in recent years—which has shown how, despite writing in the nineteenth century, Marx is essential for reflecting on our contemporary ecological degradation—is in part the product of a turn carried out by Foster and others linked to Monthly Review.His current, which came to be known as the school of the metabolic rift due to the central notion Foster rescued from volume 3 of Marx's Capital, has developed numerous ecomaterialist lines of research in the social and natural sciences—from imperialism and the study of the exploitation of the oceans, to social segregation and epidemiology. On the occasion of the release of his latest book, The Return of Nature, a monumental genealogy of great

ecosocialist thinkers that has taken him twenty years to complete, Foster tells us about the path these key figures traveled, from the death of Marx to the emergence of environmentalism in the 1960s and '70s, as well as about the relationship of his new book to Marx's Ecology and the most prominent debates of current Marxist ecological thought. His reflections thus serve to help us rethink the significance of this legacy, in view of the urgent need for a project that transcends the conditions that threaten the existence of our planet today.

Alejandro Pedregal: In Marx's Ecology, you refuted some very established assumptions about the relationship between Marx and ecology, both within and outside of Marxism—namely, that the ecological thought in Marx's oeuvre was marginal; that his few ecological insights were mostly (if not solely) found in his early work; that he held Promethean views on progress; that he saw in technology and the development of the productive forces the solution to the contradictions of society with nature; and that he did not show a genuine scientific interest in the anthropogenic effects on the environment. Your work, along with that of others, disputed these assumptions and shifted many paradigms associated with them. Do you think that these ideas persist in current debates?

John Bellamy Foster: Within socialist and ecological circles in English-speaking countries, and indeed I think in most of the world, these early criticisms of Marx on ecology are all now recognised as disproven. They not only have no basis in fact, but are entirely contradicted by Marx's very powerful ecological treatment, which has been fundamental to the development of ecosocialism and increasingly to all social-scientific treatments of the ecological ruptures generated by capitalism. This is particularly evident in the widespread and growing influence of Marx's theory of the metabolic rift, the understanding of which keeps expanding and which has been applied now to nearly all of our current ecological problems. Outside the English-speaking world, one still occasionally encounters some of the earlier misconceptions, no doubt because the most important works so far have been in English, and much of this has not yet been translated. Nevertheless, I think we can treat those earlier criticisms as now almost universally understood as invalid, not simply due to my work, but also that of Paul Burkett in Marx and Nature, Kohei Saito in Karl Marx's Ecosocialism, and many others. Hardly anyone on the left is so simplistic today as to see Marx as a Promethean thinker in the sense of promoting industrialisation over all else. There is now a widespread understanding of how science and the materialist conception of nature entered his thought, a perception reinforced by the publication of some of his scientific/ecological extract notebooks in the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe project. Thus, I don't think the view that Marx's ecological analysis is somehow marginal in his thought is given much credence among socialists in the English-speaking world today, and it is rapidly receding everywhere else. Ecological Marxism is a very big topic in Europe, Latin America, China, South Africa, the Middle East—in fact, nearly everywhere. The only way in which Marx's ecological analysis can be seen as marginal is if one were to adopt an extremely narrow and self-defeating definition of what constitutes ecology. Moreover, in science, it is often the most "marginal" insights of a thinker that prove most revolutionary and cutting edge.

Why were so many convinced earlier on that Marx had neglected ecology? I think the most straightforward answer is that most socialists simply overlooked the ecological analysis present in Marx. Everyone read the same things in Marx in the prescribed manner, skipping over what was then designated as secondary and of little importance. I remember talking to someone years ago who said there were no ecological discussions in Marx. I asked if he had ever read the chapters on agriculture and rent in volume 3 of Capital. It turned out that he hadn't. I asked: "If you haven't read the parts of Capital where Marx examines agriculture and the soil, how can you be so sure that Marx did not deal with ecological questions?" He had no answer. Other problems were due to translation. In the original English translation of Capital, Marx's early usage of Stoffwechsel, or metabolism, was translated as material exchange or interchange, which hindered rather than helped understanding. But there were also deeper reasons, such as the tendency to overlook what

Marx meant by materialism itself, which encompassed not just the materialist conception of history, but also, more deeply, the materialist conception of nature.

The important thing about Marx's ecological critique is that it is unified with his political-economic critique of capitalism. Indeed, it can be argued that neither makes any sense without the other. Marx's critique of exchange value under capitalism has no significance outside of his critique of use value, which related to natural-material conditions. The materialist conception of history has no meaning unless it is seen in relation to the materialist conception of nature. The alienation of labor cannot be seen apart from the alienation of nature. The exploitation of nature is based on capital's expropriation of the "free gifts of nature." Marx's very definition of human beings as the self-mediating beings of nature, as István Mészáros explained in Marx's Theory of Alienation, is based on a conception of the labor process as the metabolism of human beings and nature. Science as a means of enhancing the exploitation of labor can't be separated from science conceived as the domination of nature. Marx's notion of social metabolism cannot be divided off from the question of the metabolic rift. And so on. These things were not actually separated in Marx, but were removed from each other by later left thinkers, who generally ignored ecological questions, or who employed idealist, mechanist, or dualist perspectives and thus robbed the critique of political economy of its real material basis.

AP: In regard to Prometheanism, you have shown in your work how Marx's reflections on Prometheus are to be read in relation to his own scholarly research on Epicurus (as well as to the Roman poet Lucretius), and thus need to be interpreted as linked to the secular knowledge of the Enlightenment, rather than as a blind advocacy for progress. However, the dominant use of the term Prometheanism remains quite common, also in Marxist literature, which gives room to certain accelerationist and techno-fetishist trends that reclaim Marx for their aims. Should this notion be challenged more effectively, at least in relation to Marx and his materialist thought?

JBF: This is a very complicated issue. Everyone knows that Marx praised Prometheus. He was a devotee, of course, of Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound, which he reread frequently. In his dissertation he compared Epicurus to Prometheus. And Marx himself was even caricatured as Prometheus in the context of the suppression of the Rheinische Zeitung in a famous image that appears in volume 1 of Marx and Fredrick Engels's Collected Works. It thus became common for various critics within and without Marxism to characterise Marx's views as Promethean, particularly in such a way as to suggest that he saw extreme productivism as the chief aim of society. Not having any proof that Marx put industrialisation before human social (and ecological) relations, his critics simply employed the term Promethean as a way of making their point without evidence, merely taking advantage of this common association with Marx.

Yet, this was a distortion in quite a number of ways. In the Greek myth, Prometheus, a Titan, defied Zeus by giving fire to humanity. Fire of course has two manifest qualities. One is light, the other is energy or power. In the interpretation of the Greek myth in Lucretius, Epicurus was treated as the bringer of light or knowledge in the sense of Prometheus, and it was from this that Voltaire took the notion of Enlightenment. It was in this same sense that Marx himself praised Epicurus as Prometheus, the giver of light, celebrating him as the Enlightenment figure of antiquity. Moreover, Marx's references to Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound always emphasised Prometheus' role as a revolutionary protagonist in defiance of the Olympian gods.

In the age of the Enlightenment itself, the Prometheus myth was seen, not surprisingly, as all about Enlightenment, not about energy or production. Walt Sheasby, a great ecosocialist with whom I worked in the early days of Capitalism, Nature, Socialism and while I was also editor of Organization and Environment, wrote an extraordinary piece for the latter journal in March 1999, establishing conclusively that the notion of Prometheanism and the Promethean myth was

used until the nineteenth century primarily in this sense of Enlightenment. I am not sure when the usage changed. But, certainly, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's The Philosophy of Poverty represented a shift where Prometheanism came to mean industrialism and machinery, symbolizing the Industrial Revolution. Here, Prometheus was seen as standing for mechanical power. It is interesting that Marx took on Proudhon's mechanistic Prometheanism directly, attacking all such notions in The Poverty of Philosophy. Yet, the Promethean myth became reified as a story of industrialisation, something the ancient Greeks themselves could never possibly have imagined, and the common identification of Marx with Prometheus in people's minds became a way therefore of faulting him on ecological grounds. Interestingly, the charge that Marx was Promethean, which you find in such figures such as Leszek Kolakowski, Anthony Giddens, Ted Benton, and Joel Kovel, was directed against Marx exclusively and at no other thinker, which points to its ideological character.

The closest anyone could come to finding evidence that Marx was Promethean in the sense of glorifying industrialisation as its own end was in his panegyric to the bourgeoisie in the first part of The Communist Manifesto, but this was simply a prelude to his critique of the same bourgeoisie. Thus, he turned around a few pages later, ushering in all the contradictions of the bourgeois order, referring to the sorcerer's apprentice, ecological conditions (town and country), the business cycles, and of course the proletariat as the grave digger of capitalism. In fact, there is nowhere that Marx promotes industrialisation as an objective in itself as opposed to free, sustainable human development.

Explaining all of this, though, takes time and, while I have brought up all of these points at various occasions in my work, it is usually sufficient simply to show that Marx was not at all a Promethean thinker, if what is meant by this is the worship of industry, technology, and productivism as ends in themselves, or a belief in an extreme mechanistic approach to the environment. In these concrete terms, setting aside the confusions borne of myth, there can be no doubt.

AP: Twenty years after Marx's Ecology, the extensive work of the metabolic rift school has transformed today's debates about Marxism and ecology. What are the continuities and changes between that context and the current one?

JBF: There are several different strands of discussion and debate. One, the most important, as I indicated, is a vast amount of research into the metabolic rift as a way of understanding the current planetary ecological crisis and how to build a revolutionary ecosocialist movement in response. Basically, what has changed things is the spectacular rise of Marxian ecology itself, throwing light on so many different areas, not only in the social sciences, but in the natural sciences as well. For example, Mauricio Betancourt has recently written a marvellous study for Global Environmental Change on "The Effect of Cuban Agroecology in Mitigating the Metabolic Rift." Stefano Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark have applied Marx's method to the analysis of the oceanic rift in The Tragedy of the Commodity. Hannah Holleman has used it to explore dust bowls past and present in Dust Bowls of Empire. A considerable number of works have utilised the metabolic rift conception to understand the problem of climate change, including Brett Clark, Richard York, and myself in our book The Ecological Rift and Ian Angus in Facing the Anthropocene. These works, as well as contributions by others, such as Andreas Malm, Eamonn Slater, Del Weston, Michael Friedman, Brian Napoletano, and a growing number of scholars and activists too numerous to name, can all be seen basically in this light. An important organisation is the Global Ecosocialist Network in which John Molyneux has played a leading role, along with System Change Not Climate Change in the United States. Naomi Klein's work has drawn on the metabolic rift concept. It has played a role in the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil and in discussions around the question of ecological civilisation in China.

Another issue concerns the relations between Marxian ecology and both Marxist feminist social reproduction theory and the new analyses of racial capitalism. All three of these perspectives have drawn in recent years on Marx's concept of expropriation as integral to his overall critique, extending beyond exploitation. It is these connections that motivated Brett Clark and myself to write our recent book The Robbery of Nature on the relation between robbery and the rift, that is, the expropriation of land, use values, and human bodies, and how this is related to the metabolic rift. An important area is the whole realm of ecological imperialism and unequal ecological exchange on which I have worked with Brett Clark and Hannah Holleman.

Today, there are some new criticisms of Marx on ecology aimed at the metabolic rift theory itself, saying it is dualistic rather than dialectical. But this of course is a misconception, since for Marx the social metabolism between humanity and (extra-human) nature through the labor and production process is by definition the mediation of nature and society. In the case of capitalism, this manifests itself as an alienated mediation in the form of the metabolic rift. Such an approach, focusing on labor/metabolism as the dialectical mediation of totality, could not be more opposed to dualism.

Others have said that if classical Marxism addressed ecological questions, they would have appeared in subsequent socialist analyses after Marx, but did not. That position too is wrong. In fact, that is the question taken up in The Return of Nature, which was expressly intended to explore the dialectic of continuity and change in socialist and materialist ecology in the century after the deaths of Charles Darwin and Marx, in 1882 and 1883 respectively.

AP: Indeed, in Marx's Ecology you focused on the emergence and formation of Marx's materialism in correlation to that of Darwin's and Alfred Russell Wallace's theory of evolution, ending precisely with the deaths of the first two. Now, in your new book, you start from this point to trace an intellectual genealogy of key ecosocialist thinkers until the appearance of the ecological movement in the 1960s and '70s. For a long time, some of these stories did not receive enough attention. Why did it take so long to recover them? And how does the rediscovery of these links help us understand the emergence of the ecologist movement differently?

JBF: The Return of Nature continues the method of Marx's Ecology. This can be seen by comparing the epilogue of the earlier book to the argument of the later one. Marx's Ecology (apart from its epilogue) ends with the deaths of Darwin and Marx; The Return of Nature begins with their funerals and with the one person who was known to be present at both funerals, E. Ray Lankester, the great British zoologist who was Darwin's and Thomas Huxley's protege and Marx's close friend. The Return of Nature is not directed simply at the development of Marxist ideas, but at the socialists and materialists who developed what we today call ecology as a critical form of analysis. Moreover, we can see how these ideas were passed on in a genealogical-historical fashion.

Like all Marxian historiography, this, then, is a story of origins and of the dialectic of continuity and change. It presents a largely unbroken genealogy that extends, though in complex ways, from Darwin and Marx to the explosion of ecology in the 1960s. Part of my argument is that the socialist tradition in Britain from the late nineteenth to the mid–twentieth century was crucial in this. Not only was this the main period of the development of British socialism, but in the sciences the most creative work was the product of a kind of synthesis of Darwin and Marx along evolutionary ecological lines. The British Marxist scientists were closely connected to those revolutionary Marxist thinkers involved in the early and most dynamic phase of Soviet ecology (nearly all of whom were later purged under Joseph Stalin), but unlike their Soviet counterparts, the British left scientists were able to survive and develop their ideas, ushering in fundamentally new socioecological and scientific perspectives.

A common criticism of Marx's Ecology from the beginning, raised, for example, in the journal Capitalism, Nature, Socialism right after the book was published, was that, even if Marx had developed a powerful ecological critique, this had not been carried forward in subsequent socialist thought. There were two answers to this. The first was Rosa Luxemburg's statement that Marx's science had reached far beyond the immediate movement and the issues of the time, and that, as new contradictions and challenges arose, new answers would be found in Marx's scientific legacy. In fact, it is true that Marx's perception of the ecological crisis of capitalism, based in tendencies of his time, was far ahead of the historical development and movement, which in some ways makes his analysis more valuable, not less. But the other answer is that the presumption that there was no socialist ecological analysis was false. Indeed, ecology as a critical field was largely the creation of socialists. I had already tried to explain this in the epilogue to Marx's Ecology, but much more was needed. The challenge was to uncover the history of socialist and materialist ecology in the century after Marx. But doing this was a huge undertaking since there was no secondary literature to speak of, except in some respect Helena Sheehan's marvellous Marxism and the Philosophy of Science.

I commenced the archival research for The Return of Nature in 2000, around the time that Marx's Ecology was published. The idea was always to explore further the issues brought up in the epilogue, focusing on the British context. But at the same time, as I began this work, I also took on the position of coeditor (and eventually sole editor) of Monthly Review, and that naturally pulled me back to political economy, which governed my work for years. Moreover, when I wrote on ecology in these years, I had to deal first and foremost with the immediate crisis. So, I could only work on an intensive project like The Return of Nature at times when the pressure was off, during short vacations from teaching. As a result, the work proceeded slowly over the years with innumerable interruptions. I might never have finished the book except for constant encouragement by a few friends (particularly John Mage, to whom the book is dedicated), and the fact that the ecological problem came to loom so large that, for Monthly Review itself, the ecological critique became as important as the critique of political economy, making the development of systematic historical approach more necessary than ever.

However, the bigger reason the book took so long was that these stories were not known and it required an enormous amount of archival research and pursuit of obscure sources, including works that no one had read for more than half a century. Great works were cast aside and grew mouldy in obscure corners. Other writings were not published or had appeared only in hard-to-find places. The role of thinkers such as J. B. S. Haldane, Joseph Needham, J. D. Bernal, Hyman Levy, and Lancelot Hogben in the development of ecological thought was, despite their earlier prominence, then unknown or forgotten, in part a casualty of the internecine struggles within Marxism itself. Also forgotten were the great left classicists such as Benjamin Farrington, George Thomson, and Jack Lindsay. With all of this to deal with, grasping the vast scope of the analyses, placed in their proper historical context, took time.

But the historical linkages, as you say, were definitely there. The story leads in the end to figures like Barry Commoner and Rachel Carson, and also to Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Levins, Richard Lewontin, Steven and Hilary Rose, Lindsay, and E. P. Thompson (who became Britain's leading antinuclear activist)—all of whom were immensely impacted, although in different ways, by this intellectual and political inheritance. In answer to your question on how this history can help us in today's struggles, perhaps the most succinct response is the statement of Quentin Skinner, who I quote in the introduction of The Return of Nature, who says that the only purpose of such histories is to demonstrate "how our society places limitations on our imaginations." He adds that "we are all Marxists to this extent."

AP: Marx's Ecology mentions how your own internalisation of the legacy of Georg Lukács (and Antonio Gramsci) prevented you from using the dialectical method for the realm of nature. You point out how, due to this common

weakness, Western Marxism had partly abandoned the field of nature and the philosophy of science to the dominion of mechanist and positivist variants of thought. However, The Return of Nature begins precisely by questioning some assumptions about Lukács central to the departure of Western Marxism from the dialectics of nature. What conditions delayed so many findings of this importance? What were the main effects that these assumptions had on Marxism, particularly in relation to ecology?

JBF: Maybe I can explain this somewhat through my own intellectual development. When I was an undergraduate, I studied the works of Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Marx, Engels, V. I. Lenin, and Max Weber fairly extensively, as well as thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse, Mészáros, Ernst Cassirer, H. Stuart Hughes, and Arnold Hauser. So, when I got to graduate school, I had a pretty good general idea of the boundaries between Kantianism/neo-Kantianism and Hegelianism/Marxism. I was therefore surprised, in participating in courses on critical theory, to find that the very first proposition taught was that the dialectic did not apply to nature, based primarily on the authority of a footnote in Lukács's History and Class Consciousness, where he had criticised Engels on the dialectics of nature. Only by rejecting the dialectic of nature, it was argued, could the dialectic be defined in terms of the identical subject-object of the historical process.

Of course, Lukács himself, as he later pointed out, had never totally abandoned the notion of "merely objective dialectics" or the dialectics of nature, which he referred to elsewhere in History and Class Consciousness. Indeed, in his famous 1967 preface to History and Class Consciousness, Lukács, following Marx, insisted on a dialectical mediation between nature and society via labor as metabolism, and in that sense on a dialectics of nature conception. The same argument was made in his Conversations with Lukács, which I read in the early 1980s.

It was in this context that I internalised, to some extent, at a practical level, without ever fully embracing, the Western Marxist philosophical notion that the dialectic was applicable only to the human historical realm and not to nature (or natural science), which was given over to mechanism or positivism. I came to see the historical dialectic in terms of the Vician principle that we can understand history because we have made it, as advanced by Marxist historian E. P. Thompson—even though I recognised that, at a deeper level, this was not entirely satisfactory because human beings do not make history alone, but do so in conjunction with the universal metabolism of nature of which human society is an emergent part. But my interests in the 1980s were mainly geared toward political economy and history, where such issues seldom arose. As far as the human historical realm was concerned, it was easy enough to bracket the question of the dialectics of nature.

It was when I turned more directly to the question of ecology in the late 1980s and '90s that this problem became unavoidable. The dialectics of nature could only consistently be set aside on idealist or mechanical materialist grounds. Still, in writing Marx's Ecology, I consciously avoided, for the most part, any explicit, detailed consideration of the dialectics of nature in relation to Marx, given the complexity of the issues, which I was not then prepared to address, though clearly Marx's concept of social metabolism took him in that direction. Thus, in the epilogue to Marx's Ecology, I simply referred to Marx's reference to the "dialectical method" as the way of dealing with the "free movement of matter," and how this was part of the inheritance he had taken from Epicurus and other earlier materialists, mediated by his studies of Hegel. As an epistemological approach, I indicated, this could be defended as heuristically equivalent to the role that teleology played for human cognition in Kant. But the wider ontological question of "so-called objective dialectics," as this appeared in Engels (and in Lukács), and its relation to Marx, was mostly avoided (left implicit) in my book.

I did not address the dialectics of nature explicitly in any detail until 2008, in a chapter that I wrote for a book on dialectics edited by Bertell Ollman and Tony Smith (later included in The Ecological Rift). Here, I was still caught in what I called "the Lukács problem," even if I understood that, for the later Lukács, Marx's metabolism argument offered a broad pathway out of the whole epistemological-ontological dilemma. (While another pathway, I argued, was to be found in what Marx had called the "dialectic of sensuous certitude" represented by the materialism of Epicurus, Francis Bacon, and Ludwig Feuerbach, and incorporated into Marx's early work). Yet, my approach there, even if arguably a step forward, was in various ways inadequate. Part of the difficulty, as I came to understand it, lay in the philosophical limitations (and at the same time much greater scientific scope) of a materialist dialectic, which could never be a closed, circular system as in Hegel's idealist philosophy—or a totalising system consisting exclusively of internal relations and windowless monads. The dialectic for Marx was open, not closed, as was the case for the physical world itself.

The question of the dialectics of nature was to be central to The Return of Nature. One element was the study of the later Lukács, particularly The Young Hegel and the Ontology of Social Being. A key factor here was Lukács's treatment of Hegel's reflection determinations, which helped me understand the way in which Engels's dialectical naturalism had been inspired to a considerable extent by the Doctrine of Essence in Hegel's Logic. Another element affecting my views, going back to Marx's Ecology, was the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar, especially his Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom. But at the heart of my project in The Return of Nature was the close scrutiny of Engels's Dialectics of Nature itself (as well as Lenin's philosophical writings), which had untold depth. This allowed me to chart the influence that Engels exerted on subsequent thinkers—most notably, in terms of the dialectics of nature problem itself, on Needham, Christopher Caudwell, and Lindsay. In addition, William Morris in the arts and Haldane, Bernal, Hogben, and Levy in the sciences offered a variety of powerful insights into dialectical and materialist ecology.

AP: Lukács also noted how the division of alienated labor served to increase the disciplinary divisions of knowledge according to the needs of functional specialisation of capital. As a philosophy of praxis, Marxism is proposed as a totalising project, among other things, to recompose the many varied rifts that capitalism had expanded or imposed: nature and society, but also science and art. A central theme of your new book is the existence of parallel approaches to ecology and socialism in science and art. How did these links contribute to materialist ecosocialist thought? And how can they help us rethink this interaction in relation to ecology and the ecosocial crisis we face?

JBF: In writing The Return of Nature, Morris's statement in News from Nowhere that there were two insurmountable forms of knowledge, the sciences and the arts, was constantly on my mind. All of the Marxist thinkers concerned with ecology crossed these boundaries in various ways, so the parallel developments had to be examined in any genealogical-historical account. Clearly, the analytical development of ecology as a science and its relation to the dialectics of nature evolved mainly through the scientific stream. But it was hardly possible to isolate this from socialist aesthetics.

Thus, Lankester was friends with Morris and the pre-Raphaelites. Hogben took the main inspiration for his socialism from Morris. In Morris, we find an analysis rooted in the conception that all unalienated work contains art, a notion he drew from John Ruskin, but to which he added depth via Marx. Morris also reproduced independently of Marx the notion of the social character of all art. Caudwell brilliantly captured both the aesthetic and scientific strands of the overall ecological critique. His aesthetics drew on the concept of mimesis based in Aristotle and in the radical British classical tradition of the Cambridge ritualists represented by Jane Harrison, which Caudwell then merged with materialist dialectics. Caudwell's powerful approach led to George Thomson's extraordinary analyses of the origins of poetry and drama.

This whole aesthetic-ecological development on the left culminated with the Australian Marxist Jack Lindsay, who due to his enormous range of classical, literary, philosophical, and scientific studies was to bring together notions on the dialectics of nature, drawing on both aesthetics and science. It is no accident that thinkers like Lukács, Mészáros, and Thompson thought so highly of Lindsay, whose work is not sufficiently valued, perhaps because navigating his corpus of 170 volumes, extending from the ancient classics to literature, poetry, history, and the philosophy of science is simply too daunting.

AP: Engels is a key character in your new book. For a long time, within certain Marxisms, Engels was accused of having vulgarised Marx's thought, but you point out the relevance and complexity of Engels's dialectical materialism for a social and ecological critique of capitalism. Although increasingly recognised, you can still find a certain disdain for Engels and for his work's ties to Marx. How did this happen? How do we contest these positions from the standpoint of Marxist ecological thought?

JBF: I remember hearing David McClellan speak in December 1974, not long after he had written his biography on Marx. I was completely taken aback by an extraordinary tirade against Engels, which was the core of his talk. This was my first real introduction to the attacks on Engels that in so many ways came to define the Western Marxist tradition in the days of the Cold War, and which have carried over into the post-Cold War era. All of this was clearly less about Engels as a thinker than it was about the "two Marxisms," as Alvin Gouldner called it. Western Marxism and, to a considerable extent, the academic world claimed Marx as their own, as an urbane thinker, but for the most part rejected Engels as supposedly too "crude," casting him in the role of spoiler, as the person who had created a "Marxism" that had nothing to do with Marx, and who was thus responsible for the economism, determinism, scientism, and vulgar philosophical and political perspectives of the Second International and beyond, all the way to Stalin.

It should not perhaps surprise us, therefore, that while we can find hundreds, even thousands, of books and articles that mention Engels's Dialectics of Nature, there is hardly anything to be learned from them because they either treat his views in a doctrinaire way, as in much of the old official Marxism, or, in the case of the Western Marxist philosophical tradition, simply quote a few lines from Dialectics of Nature, or sometimes Anti-Dühring, so as to establish his vulgarisation of Marxism. Others, like Terrell Carver, who has written extensively on Engels, devote themselves not to furthering an understanding of Engels's work, but to the systematic severing of Engels's work from that of Marx.

I remember looking at Karl Padover's Letters of Karl Marx and wondering why it felt like such an arid empty work, despite the fact that it was filled entirely with Marx's own words. I realised it was because almost all the letters were to Engels and Engels was left out of the book, so it is a one-sided conversation, as if only Marx counted and was simply talking to himself. The Marx-Engels correspondence is definitely a two-sided conversation, and takes on much of its brilliance as a continual dialogue between these two magisterial thinkers, who together founded historical materialism.

In terms of Marxian ecology, Engels is essential. Because as brilliant as Marx's analysis was in this regard, we cannot afford to ignore the vast contributions of Engels to class-based epidemiology (the main subject of his Condition of the Working Class in England), to the dialectics of nature and emergence, to the critique of the conquest of nature, or to the understanding of human evolutionary development. Engel's critical appropriation of Darwin in Anti-Dühring was fundamental to the development of evolutionary ecology. The emergentist materialism developed in Dialectics of Nature is central to a critical scientific world view.

AP: Monthly Review has always shown great sensibility to the revolutionary struggles of the third world. Lenin's theory of imperialism, together with that of monopoly capital by Paul Sweezy and Paul Baran, dependency theory (in Ruy Mauro Marini and Samir Amin, among others) and its dialogue with world-systems analysis, or the contributions of Mészáros, among many other influences, have been essential for the elaboration of your specific ecosocialist critique. Unfortunately, and to some extent in connection to the limitations of Western Marxism, the link between ecology and imperialism has been often underestimated in other Marxist and ecological currents. Some have even considered imperialism an outdated category to deal with global capitalism. Why is it that this separation between geopolitics and ecology remains so strong in certain sectors of the left? Is a different approach to these matters possible?

JBF: In my generation in the United States, impacted by the Vietnam War and the coup in Chile, most of those drawn to Marxism came to it by way of opposing imperialism. It was partly for this reason that I was attracted early on to Monthly Review, which, practically from its birth in 1949, has been a major source of the critique of imperialism, including dependency theory and world-system analysis. Harry Magdoff's writings on imperialism, in The Age of Imperialism and Imperialism: From the Colonial Age to the Present are central to us, as well as work on imperialism by Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Che Guevara, Andre Gunder Frank, Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, and a host of others. The fact that the most revolutionary perspective in the United States has historically come from the Black movement, which has always been more internationalist and anti-imperialist in its perspective, has been crucial in defining the radical U.S. left. Yet, with all of this, there have always been major social democratic figures in the United States, such as Michael Harrington, who have made their peace with U.S. imperialism. Today, some of the representatives of the new movement for "democratic socialism" regularly turn a blind eye to Washington's ruthless interventions abroad.

Of course, none of this is new. Variants of the conflict over imperialism within the left can be seen as far back as the early socialist movement in England. H. M. Hyndman, the founder of the Social Democratic Federation, and George Bernard Shaw, one of the leading Fabians, both supported the British Empire and "social imperialism." On the other side were figures associated with the Socialist League, such as Morris, Eleanor Marx, and Engels, all of whom were anti-imperialists. It was the issue of imperialism that was most decisively to split the European socialist movement at the time of the First World War, as recounted in Lenin's Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism.

Within the New Left in Britain from the 1960s, imperialism was a major source of contention. Those who identified with the First New Left, such as Thompson, Ralph Miliband, and Raymond Williams, were strongly anti-imperialist, while the Second New Left, associated in particular with the New Left Review, either saw imperialism as a progressive force in history, as in the case of Bill Warren, or tended to downplay its significance altogether. The result, particularly with the rise of globalisation ideology in this century, was a dramatic decline in studies of imperialism (though accompanied by growing cultural studies of colonialism and post-colonialism) in both Britain and the United States. The logical outcome of this is that a figure as influential today in the left academy as David Harvey has recently pronounced that imperialism has been "reversed," with the West now on the losing end.

All of this takes us to the question of the very weak performance on the left generally in developing a theory of ecological imperialism, or unequal ecological exchange. This is a product of the systematic failure to explore capitalism's ruthless expropriation of the resources and ecology of most of the world. This is about use value, not just exchange value. Thus, the famines introduced in India under British colonial rule had to do with how the British forcibly altered the food regime in India, shifting the use values, metabolic relations, and the hydrological infrastructure essential to human survival, while also draining away India's surplus. Although this process of ecological expropriation has long

been understood by the left in India, and in much of the rest of the Global South, it is still not fully grasped by Marxists in the Global North. An exception is Mike Davis's excellent Late Victorian Holocausts.

Similarly, the massive expropriation of guano from Peru to fertilise European soil, which had been robbed of its nutrients (a manifestation of the metabolic rift), was to have all sorts of long-term negative developmental effects on Peru, and included the importation of Chinese labourers under conditions that were often characterised as "worse than slavery" to dig the guano. All of this was tied to what Eduardo Galeano called The Open Veins of Latin America.

What this tells us is that the issues of ecology and imperialism have always been intimately related and are becoming more closely intertwined all the time. The Ecological Threat Register 2020 report from the Institute of Economics and Peace indicates that as many as 1.2 billion people may be displaced from their homes, becoming climate refugees, by 2050. Under such historical conditions, imperialism can no more be analysed independently from the planetary ecological destruction that it has brought into being than the planetary ecological crisis can be addressed independently from the imperialism in which it is being played out today. This was the message that Brett Clark and I sought to convey in The Robbery of Nature, and that the two of us, together with Hannah Holleman, endeavoured to explain in our article "Imperialism in the Anthropocene," published by Monthly Review. In that article, we concluded: "There can be no ecological revolution in the face of the current existential crisis unless it is an anti-imperialist one, drawing its power from the great mass of suffering humanity.… The poor shall inherit the earth or there will be no earth left to inherit."

AP: As we have seen, interest in Marx's ecosocialism has grown greatly in recent decades. But, of course, this goes beyond Marx's historical context. Why is it important for current ecological thought to return to the ideas of Marx? And what are the challenges for Marxist ecological thought today?

JBF: Marx's ecology is a starting point and a set of foundations, not an end point. It is in Marx's thought above all that we find the foundations of the critique of political economy that was also a critique of capitalism's ecological depredations. This was no accident, since Marx dialectically presented the labor process as the social metabolism (the mediation) of nature and society. In Marx, capitalism, in alienating the labor process, also alienated the metabolism between humanity and nature, thereby generating a metabolic rift. Marx took this to its logical conclusions, arguing that no one owns the earth, not even all the people in all the countries of the world own the earth, that they simply have the responsibility to care for it and, if possible, improve it for the chain of future generations as good heads of the household. He defined socialism as the rational regulation of the metabolism of humanity and nature, so as to conserve as much as possible on energy and promote full human development. There is nothing in conventional or even left green theory—however much capitalism may be questioned in part—that has this unity between ecological and economic critique, or as comprehensive a historical synthesis. Consequently, in our planetary emergency, ecosocialism has come to rest inevitably on Marx's foundational conception. The environmental movement, if it is to matter at all, has to be ecosocialist.

The purpose of Marxian ecological thought is not merely to understand our present social and ecological contradictions, but to transcend them.

But, of course, I would not have written The Return of Nature, which focuses on the century following Marx and Darwin's deaths, if socialist ecology simply began and ended with Marx. It is crucial to understand how socialist dialectical, materialist, and ecological perspectives developed from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century in order to grasp the historical theory and practice that feeds into today's struggles. Our task now is not simply to linger on the past, but to pull all of this together to engage with the challenges and burdens of our historical time. Marx serves to

demonstrate the essential one-ness of our political-economic-ecological contradictions and their basis in the present alienated social and ecological order. This helps us unmask the contradictions of the present. But to carry out the necessary change, we need to do so with an eye to how the past informs the present and allows us to envision necessary revolutionary action.

The purpose of Marxian ecological thought is not merely to understand our present social and ecological contradictions, but to transcend them. Given that humanity is facing greater dangers than ever before and is on a runaway capitalist train headed over the cliff, this has to be our chief concern. Facing up to the planetary ecological emergency means we must be more revolutionary than ever before, and not be afraid to raise the question of altering society, as Marx said, "from top to bottom," starting from where we are. The piecemeal and reformist approach of most environmentalism, which puts faith in the market and technology, while making its peace in large part with the prevailing system, with its unceasing, totalising ecological destruction, will not work, even in the short run. There is now more than a century of socialist critique of the ecological contradictions of capitalism, which has enormous theoretical power and points to a different philosophy of praxis. In our current growing recognition that there is no choice but to leave capitalism's burning house, we need the deeper theoretical understanding of human, social, and ecological possibility, of freedom as necessity, offered by ecological Marxism. As Doris Lessing, who appears briefly in The Return of Nature, stated in her introduction to The Golden Notebook: "Marxism looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other." This is the revolutionary capacity we most need today.

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