

After Industrialism: Reviving Nature in the 21st Century

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Ecologism as a school of thought emerges as a critique of industrialism, the ideology that binds liberalism, conservatism, and socialism. It develops these three dominant political traditions by recognising nature as the basis for the human's existence and development. Two decades into a 21st century already defined by the crisis of the human in nature, the ecologisation of human society is an urgent imperative.

Hardly anything escaped the titanic forces of industrial modernity. It ploughed up the world and created it anew. It shaped a way of thinking that sees everything as dominated by the kinematic principles of machines. Humanity too became a kind of machine, with the relationship between the mind and the brain resembling that of bile and the gall bladder. The human spirit was banished, separated from the material world, which was subject to human control as a subordinate or yet to be subordinated space. One consequence of the naturalisation of human existence, or perhaps its banishment from nature, was the forgetting of the body.



The Suppression of the Ecological Question

The great political concepts – liberalism, conservatism, socialism – were deeply influenced by industrialism. In the struggle over socialism, the market economy, and the “Third Way”, that human dominance over nature could be extended indefinitely was common sense. Since the emergence of great industry in the 19th century, industrialism has been the true ideology of the epoch, tying the three main political traditions and their representatives closer together than they ever thought possible.

This common foundation came into view wherever they evaded the ecological question. For example, in a Marxism that rejected ecological thinking as a fallacious critique tainted by mysticism because of its focus on the effects of modern technology on the environment and its out-of-hand rejection of nuclear power. Anyone guilty of this could only be a

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romantic and naïve technological pessimist, or worse, a Luddite. They had failed to understand that the “social determination of form”, the bourgeois system of property relations within which

technology is used, is the real problem. This critique of ecology went so far as to claim that socialist nuclear power plants were safe because they were run to serve the wellbeing of the people, not capitalist desire for profit. The nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl stands as a memorial to this way of thinking. It revealed that not only the defects of actually existing socialism had been ignored, but also the dangers inherent in the large-scale technology of nuclear power as such.

Industrialism has many faces. Western social democracy, too, was permeated by it. Industrialism fought for nuclear power, rebuilt cities for cars not people, and – to this day – obstructs a rapid phase-out of fossil fuels. Western conservatives and liberals reversed the Marxist argument about the social determination of form. In their view, the dangers of nuclear power were not down to the capitalist profit motive but “socialist inefficiency”. Fukushima proved to be the Chernobyl of market-liberal industrialism.

The Critique of Industrialism

But industrialism was not limited to such short-sighted forms. Much of the agenda put forward by the contemporary

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ecology movement was already prefigured during the golden age of industrialism. It can be found in the German late-19th century Lebensreform (life reform) movement. Or later in the sports and hiking trends that drew people away from the grey cities into

the tamed wild of the Great Outdoors. Or in the Reformarchitektur (architecture of reform) movement in the early 1900s that brought air and sunlight into workers’ districts.

Philosophy too recognised the costs of modern industrialism. Starting with Romanticism and its aesthetic discovery of nature, via several variants of conservative cultural criticism, through to critical theory and the Frankfurt School, a thread questioning the model of progress and enlightenment associated with modernity can be followed. As different as these approaches were, what they shared was an attempt to assert an otherness to the instrumentalist-industrialist rationale of a kind that had been forgotten and repressed in the course of progress.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* traced how the Enlightenment turned away from its original humanist ideals to arrive at a functional and instrumental rationalism, paving the way for technocracy, fascism, and tyranny. Related perspectives from the wider Frankfurt School are found in Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* and in Erich Fromm’s *To Have or to Be?*

The 1960s, the peak of the glorious golden years of growth, saw a strong revival of the conservative cultural critique of industrialism of the kind found in Arnold Gehlen’s 1957 *Man in the Age of Technology*. Those who would prefer not to relate to Martin Heidegger’s critique of technical thinking and the limits of the Enlightenment might prefer Karl Marx as a firmer starting point for ecological thinking. For all his admiration of modern productive forces, Marx knew very well that the human is and remains a part of nature. Indeed, the human is that special part of nature in which it becomes

aware of itself. Ecological philosophy should take up this thought, found above all in Marx's early writings, and develop it further. It should define itself as a philosophy that deals in depth with how nature, as human, encounters itself in practice and in theory.

The chain of thought that results from this understanding is not straightforward. It reminds us that human existence belongs in a continuum, given its context in nature. As an undeniably natural being, humans are part of the causal chains and relationships in which everything that exists is reflected in everything else that exists. At the same time, ecological thinking accentuates the difference resulting from the human's conscious and purposeful awareness of its natural context. Humanity is nature, but within nature, it puts itself in an eccentric position. Humanity cannot escape nature, but neither is it rigidly determined by it.

Ecological critique is concerned with the blind spots of human intervention in nature and its repercussions, on nature as on society. It highlights how, first, nature is not simply building blocks of inert matter but a self-reflexive continuum of networks and complex chains. Second, how the human itself is a natural being by virtue of being flesh and blood. And third, that by intervening in nature the human is ultimately intervening in itself.

Work as a Metabolic Process Involving Nature

Human existence explicitly refers back to nature. In contrast to the relationship between animals and nature, humans make use of resources, tools, and techniques that are not merely found but are created specifically for a purpose. These instruments objectify human productive ends. A technical-cultural world emerges in which a way of living and interacting with nature is established and passed down through time.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger showed how the relationship with nature, mediated by tools, is realised through routinised and ingrained contexts of meaning. Only when something is missing in the work process and is no longer on hand do

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these contexts come into question. To go a step further, an additional degree of alienation arises when everything necessary for success is on hand but the act of engaging with nature nevertheless fails. In this alienation, not only does the organising context of meaning become problematic but also

the resistances and frictions that eluded the preceding structuring of meaning. Human engagement with nature encounters a hard residue that cannot be foreseen or interpreted away. Immanuel Kant referred to that residue as "thing-in-itself", a largely hidden otherness that must always be taken into account.

Ecological thinking recognises this otherness in the relationship with nature. It accounts for adversity and obstacles, especially those that occur at an advanced level of industrial production. But the basic categories from which it develops can already be discerned in simple manual work. The elemental human engagement with nature – the practical synthesis in manual work that unites purposeful action, instrument, and the object of work – is thus the starting point for ecological reflection. The otherness appears wherever the thing does not want to do what the human wants it to do: when a form breaks before it can be given its intended shape or when the hammer strikes the finger rather than the nail. Even such small forms of adversity tend to be met with abstraction that ignores the reality of engagement with nature, to consider work as if it were exclusively a matter of ideas to be fashioned seamlessly in a product. A perspective that takes work to be a concrete form of engagement with nature, on the other hand, appreciates that a great deal happens on the journey from the possible, the preconceived purpose, to the actual, the product. From a simple engagement with nature, ecological critique learns that things often turn out differently than expected.

More specifically, ecological critique is concerned with that aspect of otherness that recalls how nature is more than matter at humanity's disposal. Nature encompasses both the human worker and the society to which they belong. The resulting frictions were already present in pre-modern forms of production, as in the toxic effects of dyes that decimated craftspeople and tanners for centuries and turned entire quarters of pre-modern cities into ecological no-go areas. The more far-reaching impacts characteristic of modern industry's engagement with nature have their own long heritage, as in the ongoing process of deforestation that stretches back to ancient times. Such examples are no longer a matter of individual things and their particular difficulties, but of the repercussions of the general over-exploitation of nature that causes ecological systems to collapse and leaves landscapes desolate. Drawing on deforestation, Jean-Paul Sartre developed an important concept of ecological thinking, the "contra-finality", to refer to the spatially and temporally extensive consequences of human engagement and their repercussions.

We are Nature

Ecological thinking reminds us, individually and collectively, that nature is the basis of human existence. When applied politically and practically, it becomes a defence of nature whereby – emphatically speaking – nature defends itself. This extended understanding of nature is echoed in the activist slogan first heard in Australia in the 1970s: *We are not defending nature, we are nature defending itself.*

This is not to be understood in the sense of a naturalised engagement. Rather, the self-defence of nature refers to the dual process by which an impersonal and unconscious counter-finality visits revenge on the human instigators of ecological crisis to make them aware of their place in a wider context.

Human flesh and blood form the basis of this connection – that part of nature that centres human existence. They are the medium, torn apart into subjectivity and objectivity by modern industrialism, the basis that makes knowledge of what humanity is doing an urgent imperative.

Becoming ecological

For a long time, the parties of old industrialism regarded ecological thinking as "post-materialist", a way of thinking for the children of the bourgeoisie, First World problems. They constructed an opposition with ecology on one side and

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economics and social justice on the other. Ecological demands, according to this view, spelt economic ruin and robbed workers of their hard-earned money. This industrialist International spanned all camps and blocs, visible for decades in the alliance of Social and

Christian Democrats protecting the car industry against environmental legislation.

Now, it is clear that ecological thinking situates the human in the modern world far more accurately than old industrialism ever did, with its propensity to abstract away from the effects of humanity's engagement with nature. With regard to the social question, climate change has confirmed Friedrich Engels's insight from *The Condition of the Working Class in England*: the poorest of the poor are always the first victims of ecological crises.

Traditional industrialism is already history in many developed countries. Swathes of the old industries have shut down, leaving rust belts in their place. Globalisation has shifted much of production to the Global South, while the service

sector has expanded. Automation and digitalisation are transforming the industries that remain. This upheaval is full of opportunities and dangers.

The ecological turn is therefore a major opportunity; its absence a great threat. Green parties represent that concern. Meanwhile, traditional parties from the old triad of conservatism, liberalism, and socialism are modifying their stances. Economy and ecology are no longer understood as being in opposition but as cumulative, though usually in a half-hearted way that adds the ecological to economic only where possible. Yet the traditional parties are well placed to frame ecological aspirations much more radically.

Conservatives could recall the forgotten principle of “the preservation of creation”. Liberals could identify the market forces that could drive an ecological transition. Socialists could criticise the culture of accumulation standing in the way of such a shift. For their part, Greens need to understand the state apparatus better to allow its gradual and radical transformation towards the inclusion of nature. The ecologisation of the state is a fundamental condition for a successful paradigm shift.

What is needed is a change in the parameters to make ecology decisive for the economy and industry, the battleground on which the struggle over tomorrow’s technologies and products will be fought. Clever entrepreneurs and far-sighted trade unionists have long understood this challenge but often remained minority voices. For many scientists and engineers, the ecological agenda has long been part of their professional ethos. The parties of old industrialism have considerable catching up to do.

Populism and Zombie Industrialism

A third position has now emerged. It does not question the thesis of opposition between ecology and economy but

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strengthens and refines it, merging the rejection of migrants, feminists, and ecologists into the same reactionary chorus. It seeks to counter the ecological agenda with a “zombie industrialism”. Its advocates sit in the White House and the administrations of other countries under right-wing populist rule.

Many more around the world prepare for an anti-ecological roll-back.

Populists are acting as cheerleaders for the carbon lobby, for unbridled calls to “Drill, baby, drill!” They fight for a radicalised extractivism and against decarbonisation. They blow open the path for fracking to squeeze the last drops of oil out of the planet. Following in their wake, industrial agriculture and mass cattle farming are contributing to climate change and the greatest mass species extinction since the end of the dinosaurs.

The social question appears to have been neglected once again. In the rare earth mines of the Global South, archaically exploited workers extract raw materials for advanced products found in high-tech countries. In the Global North, ethnic discrimination and exclusion have re-emerged. “Foreigners” are forced out to save resources for “our people”. It’s not only the relationship between human and nature that is being brutalised, but that between people too.

Once More: Master-Slave

To unpick the method behind the coincidence of these two brutalisations, it is worth returning to Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's master-slave dialectic. What can be abstracted from the resistance of things, which is what leads to the ecological question disappearing from view, is shown by Hegel to be part of a social relationship. It is the position of the master, who, unlike his slave, has little to do with the business of introducing purposes into things. Hegel's master is not an innovative entrepreneur but someone who subjugates and enslaves both human and nature, just as slave owners and feudal lords used to do. The archaic subjugation of human and nature has not disappeared under modernity. It was an element of its rise in the form of "primitive accumulation". Colonialism, slavery in the USA, and contemporary working conditions in many regions of the Global South are further examples. As is the militarisation of labour during Stalin's industrialisation drive. Or the same militarisation under National Socialism that fought nature on an industrial "labour front" when it was not practising the annihilation of life through labour.

Today's zombie industrialism combines ecological and social recklessness with a tendency to create mythicised enemies and fantasies of violence. Ecological activists are no longer simply naïve post-materialists but "climate Nazis", as a

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German politician of the extreme right put it. They are monstrous children of evil to be driven out together with migrants, refugees, and Muslims. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who threatens the remaining rainforests with ruthless slash-and-burn agriculture, follows the same line when he claims that it was

environmentalists who set the jungles on fire.

Cloaked and fired up by populism, industrialism is arming itself for the final battle. It wants, in a radical step, to exclude all of the ecological and social costs of production. As it destroys nature and disintegrates societies, industrialism is declaring, "Après moi, le déluge". The price is to be paid by posterity. In the pursuit of short-term profit, industrialism risks the end of the world as we know it. This calls for a resistance that can unite social, economic, and ecological common sense. An alliance for democracy and sustainability, against the new barbarians of populism and zombie industrialism, is the great mission of our time. The task for Green parties and movements is clear.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
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