

Was Marx Greener than Red?

As a senior undergrad student at UC Berkeley in the Sociology and Mass Communication departments, I was exposed to Karl Marx ideas many times within different context of thought. Marx wrote about politics and predicted the proletariat revolution, but it is notorious that his work did not expand on the modality and the organization of the predicted communist state. In a way, Marx failed to secure the success communism, leaving to future leaders like Lenin or Mao the freedom to interpret how the “red” society he envisioned has to be organized. Even if the political part of his work is the most commonly known, Marx did not limit his work to politics. What really motivated Marx was the issue of Human Emancipation, or under what conditions, Human freedom emancipation is possible. In order to study this broad theme, Marx draws his famous theory of historic development, a discontinuous line of societal progress that link Human history from the primitive tribes to the modern capitalist societies. Doing this broad scale analysis, Marx expresses his views about the relations between human society and nature. In the context of ER180, we read a selection of Marx’s writing, dedicated to the agrarian crisis of his era. This essay is a tentative to connect the dots, Marx definition of Nature and John Bellamy Foster’s reading of Marx focused on the second agrarian revolution.

Marx theory of Historical Development (from my Soc. Lectures)

What differentiates Humans from animals from a Marxian point of view is the remarkable human ability to take tangible actions and decisions that lead to a better level of human freedom, or the process of human emancipation. When Humans started to cultivate land, they organized plant production to get their food in greater quantities, at more convenient locations and seasons. In a way, this early step marks a new level in Human Emancipation from Nature thanks to creative thinking and labor.

“Labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature” (173)

Marx insists on the inseparable relationship between Man and Nature. He compares this relationship to an “organ” for an organism that is absolutely necessary for human activity.

“Thus Nature becomes one of the organs of his [Man] activity, one that he annexes to his own bodily organs, adding stature to himself in spite of the Bible” (175)

For Marx, every man should be free to produce creatively his/her needs and he/she should have the social position to do it. Man is multitalented and should creatively apply this unique ability to change the world according to what he wants, freely, with his labor as main tool. This relation between freedom and labor, and the transformation of Human activity with division of labor create advanced modern society and capitalism.

The main problem in capitalism for Marx is private property. Ownership of the forces of production is a way to extract surplus from producers, the workers. In capitalist societies the major means of production (industry, land...) are owned as private property by the Bourgeoisie. These individuals have the rights to do whatever they want with these very important means of production according to their personal interest, and despite the common interest. Capitalism is a specific form of ownership, but also a new form of social organization with the dominant class as the Bourgeoisie and the subordinated class as the Proletariat. For Marx, Capitalism is a paradoxical and unstable system, that relies on a highly socialized forces of production (group labor); but highly individualistic in property. It is a system that produces economic crisis, where production is not fulfilling people needs. Unbalanced and unregulated free markets would eventually create a context of scarcity that will motivate the proletariat to take over the political power.

Marx's theory of Metabolic Rift, by Foster.

In his introduction Foster defines Marx's lines he is focus on as follow.

“Marx provided a powerful analysis of the main ecological crisis of his day - the problem of soil fertility within capitalist agriculture –“ (373)

This is exactly my personal reading of what Marx wrote about the modern agriculture of his time. However, I personally don't see this part of Marx writings as the proof of his commitment to Nature conservation and sustainable development. Marx simply applies his critic against Capitalism to agriculture. Large farms with few farmers are compared to large factories, where individual workers are totally separate from the product they make. The profits, the exploitation surplus, benefit mainly to the owner of the land, or the owner of the factory. Large scale agriculture is in fact a way to alienate farmers as the workers are within an industrial context. Moreover, Marx is dubious about the technological progress on fertilization. According to his classic vision of the force of production, artificial increasing of soil fertility is a capitalist tools that *“disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the Earth”* with the ultimate consequence of *“not only robbing the worker, but also robbing the soil”* (379).

With his recent perspective on Marx work, Foster found *“overwhelming evidence ... [that] suggests that Marx was deeply concerned with issues of ecological limits and sustainability”* (386).

From my point of view, Marx basic definition of Human labor, and Nature symbiotic relationship with Humans - more than its writing on agrarian revolution - are the *“overwhelming evidence”* that he considers natural resources finite, and that ultimately private property would disrupt Nature equilibrium. Since Marx, many intellectuals from different scientific, political and social science fields have elaborate on these basic ideas. Thanks to them, Capitalism cannot any more be seen without structures to regulate its excess. Global and local states agencies have been created to make Capitalism less likely to alienate the people (welfare state), but regarding Nature depravation, these structures were late to emerge. However, since the 70s, new policies have been implemented all over the world to protect Nature from Capitalism excess, but they are based on the least common motivation, though not adequate. Prof. Peter Evans from U.C Berkeley Sociology department wrote the perfect conclusion for this essay in his lecture, Development and Globalization (Soc 172).

Nature and markets generate risks. Society is supposed to mitigate them. Failure to provide social protection is likely to have a corrosive effect on social relations and communities – in Polanyi's (1957:3) dramatic rendition, "annihilating the human and natural substance of society." As the human footprint on the planet has grown larger and heavier, the consequences of treating nature as though it were something produced for the purchase of exchange and therefore indefinitely reproducible looked potentially cataclysmic. The idea that human activity could go beyond destroying the natural productivity of particular locales to having a deleterious effect on the habitability of the planet as a whole would have seemed fanciful in 1900. A century later the threat looked more than real; it looked unavoidable barring heroic public action.

Activists, followers of the classic Marxist tradition, are active all over the world to defend a fair share of nature resources and to promote respectful agriculture and industrial activity. In France, José Bové, militates against new types of Corn with modified DNA arguing that financial profits don't justify DNA manipulations, a part of biology considered as too recent to be safe for the environment. Similarly, in Bolivia, Oscar Olivera mobilizes the entire population of Cochabamba to force the authority to re-nationalize the local water utility. In this specific case, water is considered as a precious Nature local raw material that should not be marketed by large (American) corporations, motivated by profits return on the needed investments. In these two cases, environmental leaders are politically inspired by the proletariat movement against capitalism that Marx envisioned 140 years ago, but the alienation they are talking about is linked to Nature. In my view, Foster is right: Marx writings definitively have tremendous impact on today's Green movement, but it comes from Marx's definition of Nature.

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