



THE IDEA OF ENVIRONMENT IN MARXIST PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Environmental issues are now a worldwide phenomenon in the twenty-first century. It is becoming exceedingly challenging to ignore environmental challenges. These challenges transcend national lines and include overconsumption of resources, ozone depletion, climate change, the extinction of endangered species, and overfishing in international waterways. In addition to affecting people's lives and health, issues like climate change and ozone layer depletion also have an impact on every country and community. Since environmental issues are highly complicated and interwoven, they can also affect other parts of the world. For instance, air pollution in one region of Europe can be brought on by activities in another region. Karl Marx connects nature and labor in the context of the Marxist view of the environment, arguing that the former is only valuable if human activity is committed to it and referring to nature as the inorganic body of man. Marxian perspectives on nature were made more visible with the rise of environmental movements and environmental literature in the 1970s and 1980s, by the scholars such as, K. William Kapp, Barry Commoner August Bebel, Garrett Hardin, and Alan Roberts.

Key Words: Environment, Marxism, Ecology, Labor, Resources.

Introduction

Marxism is a theoretical framework that primarily focuses on class relations, thus its perspective on the environment may be limited. A commonly held belief is that the body of work produced by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels focused solely on the circumstances of labourers. Their criticism of capitalism has led some to believe that their discourse was limited to this economic system, without addressing the contemporary issues that exist within society. Marx's writings on nature are not widely recognised. Marx and Engels criticised Bruno Bauer's approach of examining the opposition between nature and history as separate entities (Marx and Engels, 1970: 62).

According to Pradip Baksi's estimation, there exist around 25,000 pages of handwritten notes and manuscripts authored by Marx and Engels that have not yet been published. A significant portion of these writings pertains to the subject matter of environment and the natural world. As per Baksi's findings, the unpublished manuscripts and notes of Marx delve into a wide range of fields, including but not limited to agriculture, agricultural chemistry, biology, pathology, chemistry, geology, climatology, physiology, mining, mechanics, mechanical engineering, history of science and technology, and philosophy of science. Marx engaged in a study of prominent intellectuals such as Hegel, Strauss, Bruno Bauer, and Feuerbach. He offered a critique of Strauss' perspective on the relationship between humans and nature, wherein humans are initially portrayed as being indistinguishable from nature while simultaneously wearing a metaphysical facade, only to later be separated from nature (as quoted in Baksi, 1996: 263 and 268).

The discourse surrounding Marx's ecological impact has been categorised by John Foster into three distinct segments. The initial segment encompasses scholars such as John Clark (1989) who posit that Marx intermittently references nature and does not formulate a comprehensive theory on the subject. According to Kovel, the emergence of Marx occurred a century prior to the maturation of the ecological crisis. Therefore, the received form of Marx's ideas is expected to be inadequate and defective when attempting to address a society, like ours, that is experiencing advanced ecosystem decay (Kovel, 2007: 9-10). Foster (2015) categorises individuals in the second camp as those who acknowledge Marx's contributions to the discourse on the environment, but contend that his focus was solely on the debate surrounding industrial development, without regard for natural constraints. Foster categorises Anthony Giddens, Robyn Eckersley, Ted Benton, David Goldblatt, and Murray



Bookchin within this particular group. The third group, consisting of Elmar Altvater, Paul Burkett, Michael Lebowitz, and Foster, maintains that Marx's treatment of ecological concerns was appropriate.

Nature and Labor: A Relationship

According to Marx's perspective, there exists a correlation between nature and labour, whereby the value of nature is contingent upon the application of human labour. In the past, adherents of Marxist ideology tended to concentrate solely on the labour component of the aforementioned assertion. Marx formulated a theoretical framework that reflects his viewpoint on the environment, commonly referred to as the 'metabolic rift' theory, albeit the terminology was introduced by John Bellamy Foster. The text discusses the concept of an irreparable division within the interdependent process of social metabolism, which is governed by the natural laws of life. The author also refers to human production as operating within the universal metabolism of nature (Marx, 1894/1981: 949). The individual in question held the belief that the process of labour served as a means by which humans could actively mediate, regulate, and exert control over the metabolic relationship between themselves and the natural world (Marx and Engels, 1975).

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx examined the correlation between labour and nature. He posited that labour is a collaborative process involving both human beings and the natural world, wherein humans initiate, regulate, and oversee the physical interactions between themselves and nature. The individual positions himself in opposition to Nature by utilising his own bodily forces, including arms, legs, head, and hands, to appropriate the products of Nature in a manner that is suitable to his own needs. The soil, along with its water content, in its natural and unaltered state serves as the primary source of sustenance for humanity. It exists autonomously and is the ubiquitous object of human labour. The objects that labour removes from their immediate environmental context are considered as labour subjects that are naturally provided. Examples of natural resources include fish caught from bodies of water, timber harvested from virgin forests, and ores extracted from veins within the earth (Marx, 1867/1998: 258).

In his book *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript* Marx places a strong emphasis on the value of nature. He claims that without nature, man cannot create anything because it "acts as the material on which the labour is realized, nature provides labour with the means of life as labour cannot live without the objects on which it operates; and also it provides means of life for the physical subsistence of the worker (Marx, 1959: 29). He goes on to add that because it serves as both his direct means of life and instrument of his life activity, man depends on biological nature, which he refers to as his inorganic body. Because man is a part of nature, a man's physical and spiritual well-being are connected to the natural world (Marx, 1959: 31).

In addition, he adds that animals that have been domesticated for centuries serve as another tool of labour in addition to wood, stone, bones, etc. He continues by saying that Earth is an instrument of man's labour, for example, it provides the labour with stones which can be used for cutting, grinding, throwing, etc. (Marx, 1867/1998: 260). Marx's point is that natural resources have been utilised by humans as tools or instruments of labour. Furthermore, he claims that all other businesses have exploited raw materials and objects already filtered through labour with the exception of the extractive industries, which include agriculture, mining, fishing, and hunting (Marx, 1867/1998: 262). Marx and Engels have outlined the significance of soil. Both Marx and Engels emphasised the value of soil in the *Communist Manifesto*. The working class's ten-point programme includes an improvement to soil quality as one of the actions to be taken to strengthen its position as the ruling class. The seventh point states that cultivation of the waste land and improvement of the soil in accordance with a common plan should take place (ibid).

Capitalism and Metabolic Rift

According to Karl Marx, capitalism is responsible for negatively impacting the self-sustaining principle of agriculture. Marx observed in his *Grundrisse* that agriculture had lost its self-sustaining nature under capitalism. He further noted that the natural conditions required for agricultural production were no longer readily available within the industry, but rather existed as a separate and independent industry (Marx, 1939-41/1973: 527). According to Marx's perspective, the elimination



of the 'metabolic rift' that has been generated by capitalism between nature and humanity is deemed necessary. According to the author, the food's crucial soil nutrients were transported over long distances to heavily populated urban areas due to a disruption in soil metabolism resulting from industrialized agriculture. The aforementioned materials were ultimately discarded and contributed to the deterioration of urban environmental conditions, as well as being absorbed into the ground. The speaker placed significant emphasis on the necessity of implementing a rational regulatory framework for the metabolic relationship between humans and nature. This framework is deemed crucial and fundamental in establishing a sustainable society that transcends the limitations of capitalism (As quoted in Foster, 2015: 3). Therefore, the co-development of nature and society is advocated, as natural history and human history are viewed as distinct yet interconnected facets of a unified entity (William, 2010).

Marx attributes the depletion of soil fertility to capitalist production, stating that the concentration of population in urban areas and the resulting disruption of the circulation of matter between humans and the soil prevents the return of essential elements consumed by humans in the form of food and clothing. This violation of the necessary conditions for sustainable soil fertility is a consequence of the historical motive power of society being concentrated in urban centers. Every advancement made in capitalistic agriculture can be viewed as an advancement in the skill of exploiting both the laborer and the soil. Similarly, any improvement in the soil's fertility can be seen as a step towards depleting the long-term sources of that fertility. The statement posits that the process of destruction is accelerated in countries that initiate their development on the basis of modern industry, such as the United States (Marx, 1867/1998: 727).

The process of capitalist production engenders technological advancement at the expense of the fundamental sources of wealth, namely the soil and the labor force. Marx and Engels advocate for the establishment of an ecologically sustainable society, which can be facilitated by eliminating the dichotomy between urban and rural areas. This can be accomplished by evenly dispersing the populace across the nation. Furthermore, the realization of a sustainable society can be facilitated through the establishment of a comprehensive linkage between industrial and agricultural production. Marx extensively expounded upon the relationship between humanity and the natural world, yet this particular contribution has not been given significant emphasis within his broader Marxist ideology. According to Rosa Luxemburg, several components of his theoretical construct that surpass class relations were subsequently assimilated with the evolution and growth of Marxism and the socialist movement (Luxemburg, 1970). Marx and Engels' extensive writings on the environment and natural sciences are noteworthy for their era.

Marx establishes a correlation between his theory of value and the issue of pollution, contending that pollution significantly influences the determination of a commodity's value. According to his perspective, an increase in pollution levels results in a corresponding increase in labor required for commodity production. Consequently, productivity levels decrease as additional time is necessary for raw material purification. Reducing pollution levels can lead to increased productivity and subsequently higher profits, as more output can be generated in a shorter amount of time. As per the author's statement, the heightened productivity of the labor utilized results in a decrease in the commodity's value, cost price, and ultimately, its production price (Marx, 1867/1998: 781). Engels had communicated to Marx through a letter that the contemporary industry is a significant waster of resources such as energy, coal, ores, and forests (Marx and Engels, 1942: 410).

As per Paul Hampton, the esteemed scholars Marx and Engels have perused the literary works of the renowned German botanist Carl Nikolaus Fraas. It is noteworthy that Marx's personal library boasts a compilation of three of Fraas's books, which have served as a source of inspiration for him. Marx had communicated to Engels via a written correspondence, expressing his interest in Fraas' book titled *Klima und Pflanzenwelt in der Zeit, eine Geschichte beider* [*Climate and the Plant World throughout the Ages, a History of Both*] (1847). The book is noteworthy for its demonstration of the historical changes in climate and plant life. The individual in question espouses Darwinian beliefs prior to the advent of Darwin's theories, and acknowledges the possibility of species evolution occurring during historical periods. However, he also holds expertise in the field of agronomy. The



individual asserts that through the process of cultivation, the level of moisture favored by farmers diminishes, resulting in the migration of plants from southern to northern regions, ultimately leading to the formation of steppe. The initial impact of cultivation is beneficial. However, it ultimately becomes detrimental due to the process of deforestation. The inference drawn is that unregulated cultivation, which occurs in an organic manner, results in the creation of barren regions such as Persia, Mesopotamia, and Greece. The aforementioned statement exhibits an inherent inclination towards socialism that is not consciously acknowledged (Marx and Engels, 1987: 557).

In his work *Capital Volume 1*, Marx underscored the ecological exploitation of one country by another. He specifically noted that England had exported soil from Ireland without providing the cultivators with the necessary resources to replenish the lost constituents, ultimately leading to a decline in soil quality (Marx, 1867/1998: 1105). The concept of sustainability has been defined by Marx in the *third volume of Capital*. The individual held the belief that humanity does not hold dominion over the planet, and therefore should act as stewards of the environment by striving to enhance its condition. As per his perspective, the private ownership of land by specific individuals would seem as illogical as an individual's private ownership of other individuals, from the vantage point of an advanced socio-economic structure. According to the author, societies, nations, and all coexisting societies do not have ownership over the earth, but rather possess it as usufructuaries. It is their responsibility to pass down the earth to future generations in an improved state, similar to the actions of *boni patres familias* or good heads of household (Marx, 1984/1981: 959).

Marxism and Ecology

Subsequent to Karl Marx, a number of Marxist intellectuals have continued to articulate their perspectives on the environment. The inception of the scholarly periodical titled *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* by James O'Connor in 1988 facilitated the advancement of eco-Marxism, a Marxist outlook on the environment. The *Monthly Review* and *The Socialist Register* were also among the journals in question. According to O'Connor (1988), the relationship between capital and nature is just as fundamental as the relationship between capital and labor when examining how capitalism sustains and ultimately undermines itself. This implies that the correlation between capital and nature bears resemblance to the relationship between capital and labor. Subsequent to this, a number of publications have emerged pertaining to Ecological Marxism, such as Ted Benson's *The Greening of Marxism* (1996), Paul Burkett's *Marx and Nature: a Red and Green Perspective* (1999), and John Foster's *Marx's Ecology* (2000). These works have demonstrated and endeavored to propose that Marxist theory can serve as a framework for addressing ecological issues and that Marx and Engels' critique of capitalism encompasses their perspective on the environment (Williams, 2017).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of environmental movements and literature prompted a number of scholars, including K. William Kapp and Barry Commoner, to elucidate the Marxian viewpoint on nature. The aforementioned scholars, namely August Bebel, Garrett Hardin, and Alan Roberts, have been recognized for their contributions to the field of environmental studies from a Marxist perspective. In his 1968 work entitled *Tragedy of the Commons*, Garrett Hardin posited that in the absence of a clear owner, the commons will inevitably be depleted by individuals who exploit it without contributing to its upkeep, commonly referred to as "free riders. The tragedy of the commons is primarily caused by the private exploitation of shared resources and the historical emergence of large-scale monoculture agriculture. According to Hardin's (1968) analysis, the appropriation of forest resources by the general populace ultimately led to the establishment of individual ownership, which in turn contributed to the prevalence of destitution.

August Bebel, a prominent Marxist scholar, discussed the topics of soil degradation and the natural environment in his notable publications, namely *Woman and Socialism* (1910) and *Society of the Future* (1879). According to Bebel (1910), the distinguishing factor between humans and animals is their capacity to comprehend the principles of nature and utilize them in a deliberate and astute manner. Bebel opined on the depletion of soil nutrients, advocating for a balanced replenishment of chemical components lost during crop growth, as well as an additional supply of essential substances tailored to the specific plant genus (Bebel, 1971: 2). According to Bebel (1971), the capitalist mode of agriculture is characterized as a system of soil vandalism that results in soil impoverishment and



reduced harvest yields, unless the use of artificial fertilizers is employed to compensate for the lack of natural ones. Bebel (1971) expressed apprehension regarding the disposal of human waste in German rivers. He noted that a significant amount of excrement from urban areas is discharged into waterways, leading to their contamination. Additionally, refuse generated by households, workshops, and factories, which could serve as fertilizer, is being squandered. Bebel emphasized the need for future generations to devise strategies to curtail this wastefulness (ibid).

A significant occurrence during the 1980s was the establishment of the scholarly publication *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* (CNS) in 1988, helmed by James O'Connor as its inaugural editor. In his publication David Pepper expressed criticism towards several frameworks of Green politics, specifically targeting deep ecologists (Pepper, 1994). According to Kovel and Löwy's 'Ecosocialist manifesto', the ecosystem has been adversely affected by the extensive reach of capitalism, which has led to the exposure of the environment to pollutants, depletion of resources, habitat destruction, and the reduction of nature's sensuous vitality to a mere commodity for capital accumulation. Additionally, the authors argue that consumerism and depoliticization have resulted in the majority of the world's population being reduced to a mere reservoir of labor power (Kovel and Lowy, 2001: 33).

The expansion of capitalism is known to give rise to two major issues, namely the 'crises of ecology' that result from uncontrolled industrialization and the "societal breakdown" that stems from the form of imperialism referred to as globalization (ibid: 34). Similar to Marx and Engels, Karl Kautsky has established a connection between the degradation of the environment and the profit-driven nature of capitalism. The author expressed that under the capitalist mode of production, there is a direct correlation between the speed at which soil fertility is depleted and the level of profit generated (Kautsky, 1988: 201).

Derek Wall, an Eco Marxist, attributes the escalation of poverty, hunger, famine-related diseases, and deforestation to capitalism. The author encapsulates his thesis by asserting that the production of fundamental goods under the capitalist system is contributing to the deterioration of the environment, particularly in the southern hemisphere where crops are cultivated for exportation. This practice results in the depletion of water resources for subsistence farmers, ultimately exacerbating the issue of hunger. The aforementioned degradation results in impoverishment for a significant portion of the global populace. The process of deforestation involves the enclosure and subsequent felling of forested areas, which are then often replaced with monoculture cash crop species such as eucalyptus. As elucidated in preceding chapters, this form of progress results in the exacerbation of poverty by means of severing the impoverished from their indigenous modes of production (Wall, 2005: 155-56).

According to James O'Connor, the capitalist system engages in technological innovation to address prevailing environmental issues, but inadvertently generates additional ecological challenges in the course of doing so. The author provides an illustration by citing the instance of nuclear power, which is frequently presented as a substitute for non-renewable fossil fuels. Nonetheless, it poses significant risks to both human health and security, and produces hazardous radioactive waste (O'Connor, 1998: 320). Ian Angus and Simon Butler attribute environmental degradation to the capitalist system. Their assertion posits that environmental degradation is not primarily caused by factors such as poverty, population growth, or deforestation, but rather by the deleterious effects of capitalism. The United States of America possesses a mere 5% of the global population, yet is responsible for 50% of the total carbon emissions worldwide (Angus and Butler, 2011: 176).

Robyn Eckersley distinguishes between two distinct forms of Eco Marxism: Orthodox Eco Marxism and Humanist Eco Marxism. As per his statement, the former perspective exhibits a greater focus on anthropocentrism, with the objective of emancipating nature from the exploitative practices of the capitalist or bourgeoisie class, and instead entrusting its preservation to the working class. Conversely, the latter viewpoint advocates for human beings to act as custodians of nature, assuming responsibility for its protection and maintenance (Eckersley, 1992). According to the author, orthodox eco-Marxists aim to substitute the capitalist system's private and socially unjust domination of nature with communism's public and socially just domination of nature (Eckersley, 1992, 85). Lewis



Mumford, a Marxist scholar, presents his viewpoint on the environment and advocates for a stationary state as a potential resolution to ecological issues. As per his statement, the ideology fosters environmentalism and is founded on principles of equality, wherein allocation is predicated on necessity rather than aptitude or productive input (Mumford, 1973: 411).

Marxist theory posits that various economic activities, such as deforestation, overfishing, utilization of fossil fuels, and the production and disposal of waste and chemicals, have resulted in significant environmental degradation. Nevertheless, these endeavors have proven advantageous to the capitalist class. According to Marxist ideology, the primary impetus behind capitalism is the pursuit of profit and the accumulation of capital, rather than prioritizing considerations of human or societal well-being. Capitalism is an economic system that emphasizes the principles of a free market and competition. As per their perspective, the governance systems in capitalist nations priorities the interests of the capitalist elite rather than the general populace. According to the Marxist perspective on the environment, the primary cause of climate change is attributed to capitalism, rather than individual avarice or overpopulation. Attempting to limit the global population will not effectively address the primary issue.

Despite the cessation of fossil fuel usage by individuals, the issue will persist due to the perpetual consumption of fossil fuels by large corporations. The implementation of solutions and themes such as 'do our bit' may prove ineffective due to the presence of unequal distribution of power within a capitalist society. The notion is posited that carbon emissions exhibit a direct correlation with the degree of capitalist economic advancement, rather than with population size. The United States exhibits a per capita production of 19.5 metric tonnes, while Ireland and China produce 10.6 million and 12.6 million tonnes, respectively. In contrast, Ethiopia's production stands at a mere 0.04 million tonnes (Malyneux, 2015: 3).


According to Daniel Tanuro, Marx's analysis did not distinguish between the utilisation of wood and other natural resources as a means of energy by capitalists, and the use of coal, which Tanuro argues represents the divergence between renewable and non-renewable energy sources. One potential solution to address the issue of capitalist misappropriation of wood is through the implementation of reforestation and afforestation initiatives, such as the planting of additional trees. Once the reserves of coal, oil, and gas are exhausted, they are non-renewable and cannot be replenished. Tanuro argues that Marx's comprehension of ecological issues is significantly flawed due to his inability to distinguish between renewable and non-renewable energy sources (Tanuro, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Karl Marx held the belief that nature is man's instrument and that it provides them with the fundamental commodities on which human labor may be carried out. This puts humans on a higher level than the environment, which is a stance that is not acceptable to deep ecologists because they favor equality for both humans and the natural world. Marxist philosophers blame capitalism for the deterioration of the environment, but they forget to discuss the benefits of capitalism, such as how it encourages the deployment of environmentally friendly technology. In a similar vein, the opinion of James O'Conner, according to which capitalism is responsible for the invention of technology that is responsible for greater environmental degradation, is susceptible to criticism on the same grounds. Not all technological advancements are negative; for instance, the development of technologies such as appliances that do not use chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) or electric cars has contributed to a reduction in the amount of pollution in the environment.

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