

Karl Marx, Radical Environmentalist: An Ecological Critique of Capitalism

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Image: Karl Marx, radical environmentalist (Eric Ruder)

International Socialist Review columnist Phil Gasper challenges the myth that Marxism has nothing useful to say about the environment—with help from the old man himself.

At the demonstration in Washington, D.C., in February to oppose the Keystone XL pipeline, which is being built to transport tar sands oil from Western Canada to the U.S. Gulf Coast, members of the Ecosocialist Contingent carried signs reading “System Change, Not Climate Change!”

The slogan was well received, as growing numbers of environmental activists recognize that only fundamental social and economic changes can solve the deepening global ecological crisis.

But what kinds of changes are needed and what strategies can win them? There are serious debates within the movement. What I want to argue here is that activists have much to gain by engaging with the ecological critique of capitalism first developed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the 19th century.

Until quite recently, there was a common myth that Marx and Engels had nothing useful to say about the environment. But over the past 10 to 15 years, this myth has been refuted by writers like the sociologist John Bellamy Foster and the environmental economist Paul Burkett.

In his book *Marx’s Ecology*, published in 2000, Foster shows that ecological ideas were central to Marx and Engels’ materialist outlook from the early 1840s. For example, in his 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx wrote:

Man lives on nature—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.

Both Marx and Engels point out in their later writings that capitalism disrupts the link between humans and the rest of the natural world, to the detriment of both. Marx sometimes calls this the “metabolic rift”—“an irreparable break in the coherence of social interchange prescribed by the natural laws of life.”

In his notebooks for *Capital* written in the 1850s, later published as the *Grundrisse*, Marx notes:

It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labor and capital.

In capitalist economies, a small minority, driven by competition and the search for ever-greater profits, controls the means of production. The system imposes a drive to accumulate on individual capitalists, and this results in a focus on short-term gains that ignore the long-term effects of production, including its consequences for the natural environment.

According to Engels:

As individual capitalists are engaged in production and exchange for the sake of the immediate profit, only the nearest, most immediate results must first be taken into account. As long as the individual manufacturer or merchant sells a manufactured or purchased commodity with the usual coveted profit, he is satisfied and does not concern himself with what afterwards becomes of the commodity and its purchasers.

Engels points out the way in which this drive for profit can lead to ecological catastrophe:

The same thing applies to the natural effects of the same actions. What cared the Spanish planters in Cuba, who burned down forests on the slopes of the mountains and obtained from the ashes sufficient fertilizer for one generation of very highly profitable coffee trees—what cared they that the heavy tropical rainfall afterwards washed away the unprotected upper stratum of the soil, leaving behind only bare rock!

Engels concludes: “In relation to nature, as to society, the present mode of production is predominantly concerned only about the immediate, the most tangible result; and then surprise is expressed that the more remote effects of actions directed to this end turn out to be quite different, are mostly quite the opposite in character.”

In *Capital*, drawing on the pioneering research of the German chemist Justus von Liebig, Marx discusses the process by which capitalism tends to deplete soil fertility:

Capitalist production, by collecting the population in great centers, and causing an ever-increasing preponderance of town population, on the one hand concentrates the historical motive power of society; on the other hand, it disturbs the circulation of matter between man and the soil, i.e., prevents the return to the soil of its elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; it therefore violates the conditions necessary to lasting fertility of the soil.

Most obviously, human waste that in the past would have been used as fertilizer now has to

be disposed of in other ways. "Excretions of consumption are of the greatest importance for agriculture," Marx points out. "So far as their utilization is concerned, there is an enormous waste of them in the capitalist economy. In London, for instance, they find no better use for the excretion of four and a half million human beings than to contaminate the Thames with it at heavy expense."

Meanwhile, the problem of soil depletion in 19th century Britain was dealt with first by importing large quantities of bones from Europe and guano from South America, and later with the use of artificial fertilizers, which in turn created their own problems of runoff and ground water contamination. According to Marx:

[A]ll progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the laborer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility...Capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the laborer.

In Marx and Engels' day, the environmental damage caused by capitalism was localized to particular regions or countries. Today, the threat of climate change is global in scope, with the production of greenhouse gases by the most developed capitalist economies threatening ecosystems across the planet.

But while the scale and scope of the environmental crisis today is much bigger and the danger correspondingly greater, the underlying causes—the capitalist imperative to accumulate and grow, and the resulting "metabolic rift" between humans and the rest of the natural world—remain the same.

Because of this, there can be no technological fix for problems like global warming. Of course, new technologies—particularly renewable energy sources based on the sun, wind and tides—are needed. But they will not be sufficient unless they are integrated into an economic system that is not driven by the need to continually expand and that is democratically planned to ensure long-term sustainability.

For Marx, this meant "the associated producers...rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature."

As Engels pointed out, however, such rational regulation would have to be undertaken with the greatest care:

Let us not...flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places, it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first...

Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage

over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.

Marx and Engels both argued that an environmentally sustainable society would require the “abolition of the antithesis between town and country.” Engels spelled out that this meant “as uniform a distribution as possible of the population over the whole country” and “an integral connection between industrial and agricultural production.”

If this analysis is correct, then environmentalists must set their sights not just on changes within the capitalist system, but ultimately on the abolition of capitalism itself. To avoid ecological catastrophe, we need to create a society based not on competition and perpetual growth, but on cooperation, economic democracy and long-term sustainability.

Marx offers the vision of such a society in the final pages of *Capital*, Volume 3:

From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men.

Even an entire society, a nation or all simultaneously existing societies taken together are not owners of the earth, they are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias* [good heads of households].

We hope to put a stop to immediate threats like the Keystone XL pipeline with our activism. But ultimately, the hope of avoiding an environmental Armageddon requires us to take seriously the idea of fighting for the kind of system change that Marx described.

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