



MARX AND THE ECO- LOGIC OF CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT

Devan Pillay
Department of Sociology
University of the Witwatersrand

The problem laid bare

- The global crisis is a poly-crisis, with intertwined socio-economic and ecological dimensions.
- Its origins lie not in the 1970s neo-liberal counter-revolution, but in the historical trajectory of global capitalism.
- Can a Green New Deal (or global/national social democracy), which includes a role for the market under state/global regulation and standards, offer a solution?
- Or is sustainable human development (and with it 'decent work' and a 'decent life') impossible *for all* under capitalism?

Different approaches to Marx and Ecology

a) Marx was pro-technology and anti-ecological (indistinguishable from Soviet practice);

OR

b) Marx had moments of ecological insight, but that was minor compared to his pro-technology, pro-growth stance;

OR

c) at best Marx had a theory about ecological degradation in agriculture – but this was separate from his core social analysis;

OR

d) Marx had a *systemic approach* to nature and to environmental degradation (Foster, Burkett)

Marx and Sustainability

- “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]” (Capital, Vol 3)

Misunderstandings about Marx and Ecology

- ‘Metabolic rift’ between town and country, humans and nature
- Not idiocy of rural life (*Communist Manifesto*) but *isolation* of rural life (mis-translation says Foster)
 - same period Marx had high praise for peasant struggles
- Not *domination* of nature in hard sense, but **mastery in accordance with nature’s laws.**
 - *Neither anthropocentric (Humans above all else)*
 - *NOR eco-centric (Nature above all else)*
 - *BUT dialectical interaction between Humans and Nature*
- Rooted on Darwin’s theory of evolution

ECO-MARX AGAINST PROMETHEAN MARXISM

- Early Marxists took up ecological issues (Lenin, Luxemburg, Bukharin, early Soviet scientists)
- Stalin obliterated ecological movement
- Blind pursuit of industrial development at all costs (PRODUCTION TREADMILL – state capitalism)
- Celebrated by Soviet-inclined Marxists in race with capitalist West
- But Western Marxism's aversion to natural sciences (and positivism) also led to neglect of Marx's ecology
 - Exceptions British Marxism (esp like Caudwell)
- Revival only from 1970s (and particularly Burkett and Foster in 1990s)

Weakness in Marx's ecology

- Expected imminent socialist revolution
- Focussed more on exploitation of Labour
- Capitalist sows seeds of own destruction (Labour movement)
- Devoted more attention to ecology in post-capitalist society (Sustainable human development)
- But now clear that *Nature* also be gravedigger of capitalism (indeed, possibly more so than Labour)
 - Depletion of fossil fuels that drove industrialisation
 - Climate change
 - Destruction of eco-systems; desertification; tropical forests; etc

The Eco-logic of fossil capitalist development

- Accumulation for the sake of accumulation (incessant growth/consumption)
- Accumulation by dispossession (of peoples; of the commons e.g. privatisation)
- Enclave development (core-periphery)
- “Globalisation” – enlarged periphery in Core;
 - Enlarged core within Periphery
 - Exceptions: East Asia

Affluenza and the rise of the *Americum* (T. Friedman)

- “Too many Americans”
- Consumption of rising middle classes unsustainable
- Need 2-3 more planets
- Crisis of ‘modernisation’
- “*eco-logic of capitalism* [is] an important, if not the most important, *restraint on growth*” (my emphasis).

Friedman (and Obama's) "Green revolution"

- T. FRIEDMAN: Innovation only possible through state intervention (Obama agenda)
 - Taxes, regulations, standards, subsidies etc
 - Get "prices right" to spur on innovation in renewable technologies
 - Increased efficiency of energy use
 - Clean coal; clean nuclear power
 - 'Decoupling': continue economic growth without depleting resource base

Critique of 'decoupling' thesis

- BUT: efficiency just leads to more production (Foster)
 - Industrial treadmill integral part of capitalism
 - Coal sequestration unproven technology (false promise)
 - Nuclear power also carbon intensive and dangerous waste
 - Not eliminate coal-fired power stations in foreseeable future
- Shift of *social priorities* impossible with vested interests
 - restricted parameters of technological use (market-driven)
 - not driven by needs of society and ecology (nature)

Green New Deal?

- New Deal (or Social Democracy) only benefitted tiny minority of world's population (in SA white minority)
- Based on accumulation (growth) imperative (wealth/possession for some, poverty/dispossession for majority)
- Can all boats rise in sea of 'development'?
 - globalising markets (IMF, WTO, World Bank) and
 - A few global/national regulations and standards (T. Friedman, Stiglitz)?
- Or will GND at best be new form of *enclivity*?
 - Green islands surrounded by seas of pollution, poverty and plundered communities?
 - Underpinned by global hegemony/military domination?

Sustainable Human Development (Evo Morales)

- Experiments in Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Kerala(India).
Evo Morales:
- “As Long as we do not change the capitalist system for a system based on complementarity, solidarity, and harmony between the people and nature, the measures that we adopt will be **palliatives that will [be] limited and precarious in character**. For us, what has failed is the model of **“living better” (than others)**, of **unlimited development, industrialisation without frontiers, of modernity that deprecates history, of increasing accumulation of goods at the expense of others and nature**. For that reason we promote the idea of **Living Well, in harmony with other human beings and with our Mother Earth”** (quoted in Foster, JB (2009)).

Eco-socialist economics

- Solidarity social economies
 - Subordinate 'economics' to society
 - 'Sufficiency' vs incessant 'growth'
 - Steady state economies (esp for developed countries)
 - Co-operatives (production, sales etc)
 - Local economies (reduce food miles)
 - Renewable energy
 - Regional trade (ALBA model based on solidarity, not competition)
 - Shared technology, innovation (e.g internet, copyleft)
 - **Reduce hours** of formal work; increase social wage (greater 'leisure' time to pursue socially reproductive, personally creative activities)

Eco-socialist democracy

- Participatory democracy
- Neither state-centric nor market -centric but society-centric
 - Maximum transparency of decision-making
 - Participatory budgeting at local level
 - Mobilised/institutionalised counter-power (keep leaders on short leash)
 - Media diversity, access to information and freedom of expression (minimum state, market influence)
- Global regulations and standards
 - Minimise race to bottom (dictatorship of capital)
 - Maximise race to top (democracy of humanity, in harmony with nature)