Marx and Engels and “Small Is Beautiful” :: Monthly Review

Samar Bagchi, John Bellamy Foster, and Fred Magdoff    more on Environment/Science, Marxist Ecology

I am a regular reader of Monthly Review. I read with interest the recent articles on ecology and Marxism (Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, “What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism,” MR, March 2010, and Fred Magdoff, “Ecological Civilization,” MR, January 2011). It is true that Marx and Engels conceive that capitalism engenders a “metabolic rift” in nature and society. But both of them emphasize that the industrial growth that socialism would produce is beyond imagination under capitalism. Engels writes in Principles of Communism: “Once liberated from the pressure of private ownership, large-scale industry will develop on a scale that will make its present level of development seem as paltry as seems the manufacturing system compared with the large-scale industry of our time. This development of industry will provide society with a sufficient quantity of products to satisfy the needs of all.”

In The Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels note: “The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible.” Soviet leadership took these words literally and wanted to outrace the United States in per capita production and collapsed.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, it was impossible for Marx and Engels to envisage the ecological catastrophe that a constantly expanding industrial society can ensue.

India’s Gandhi understood this. He writes in the beginning of the twentieth century: “God forbid India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.” We can understand this today. If India and China, with a population of more than 2.5 billion, develops an ecological footprint of ten hectares per person as in the United States, which the rich and middle class of India are trying to emulate, the whole world will be stripped bare like locusts within a few decades. We have to redefine what is “development” or “civilization.” The creative outpourings of Mediterranean civilization, the ancient Indians, the Islamic civilization, and the renaissance in Europe are highly valued even today, compared to which, “We are hollow men / We are stuffed men / Our headpiece filled with straw,” as T.S Eliot said. But they did not have Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Internet, and rockets. The only advantage that Homo sapiens has over other species is its immense capacity to create literature, music, arts, science, etc. which other species do not possess. A civilized society will foster creative potential and not the gluttonous consumerism of the industrial society.

I think it is only a classless, egalitarian society with equity and justice, a simple-living society with decentralization of economy and polity, and gender equality that can bring an ecological civilization. More than 80 percent of the population in third world countries like India lead a very simple life. We have to remember Gandhi’s saying: “Nature has given man enough to satisfy his need but not enough to satisfy his greed.” It is perhaps very simple for a country like India to start an ecological society. But it is difficult for the Western society whose enchanting glamour is based on the sucking of blood and sweat of the periphery for more than 150 years. The dispossessed of the world have to engage in struggle and a process of construction to bring into existence an ecological society.

I would very much like my views to be printed in MR and a debate generated. Best wishes and regards from a 79-year-oldie!

A Response
John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff

Thank you for your letter. Your argument with regard to Marx and Engels is one that we have frequently heard, but with which we cannot agree in entirety. You begin by acknowledging the importance of the concept of “metabolic rift” as presented by the 49-year-old Marx of Capital, and then you suggest that this outlook was contradicted by the views of the 29-year-old Marx and the 27-year-old Engels of The Communist Manifesto. But do not their later, more mature assessments take precedence over their earlier ones?

Marx and Engels’s thinking was not frozen in place in 1848. They continued to expand their knowledge as they progressed in their study of capitalism (as indicated by the concept of the metabolic rift). Theirs was an age of growing environmental awareness, and to their credit, they learned extensively from this, developing their own ecological assessment and building it into their overall critique of capitalism. In this, Marx’s Capital went considerably beyond the Communist Manifesto—which was written well before Marx carried out his full critique of political economy. Where Capital and the Manifesto conflict, then, it is Capital that we should see as representing Marx’s developed view.

Marx and Engels were acutely aware of the waste and environmental destruction that capitalism brought, as they indicated in numerous passages, though, as you say, they could not “envisage the [full] ecological catastrophe that a constantly expanding industrial society can ensue.” Marx found Tyndall’s experiments on the sun’s rays fascinating, sometimes attended the latter’s lectures in London in the early 1860s, and may even have been there when Tyndall first demonstrated his discovery that carbon dioxide, along with other gases, generated a greenhouse effect. Yet no one at that time could have foreseen the kind of planetary climate change that we are facing today as a result of this same greenhouse effect and climate forcing by human beings. But what of that? Marx’s real importance to the ecological discussion lies elsewhere, in his recognition of the deep, systematic, and enormously destructive conflict between capitalism and the environment. Marx, after Liebig, depicted industrial capitalism as a robbery-system (Raubbau) in its relation to nature. On that he left no doubt.

What appears at first glance to be your strongest piece of evidence that Marx and Engels were uncritical proponents of industrialization is the quote from Engels’s Principles of Communism—a work that was written as a preliminary draft for what later became The Communist Manifesto. But it is significant that Marx, who at this point had more critical reservations about the ecological underside of industrialization than Engels did, chose not to incorporate that statement into the Manifesto itself.

To be sure, the Manifesto declared that in the context of a revolution against capitalism the proletariat would have “to increase the total productive forces of society as rapidly as possible.” Marx and Engels were no enemies of industrialization per se, and by today’s standards these were still quite undeveloped economies. But the founders of historical materialism never saw this expansion of productive forces as the ultimate end of society. Rather, socialism/communism as an end goal, as Marx was later to explain in Capital, had to do with the rational regulation by the associated producers of the metabolic relations between nature and humanity, and therefore of the productive relations of human beings themselves. The object was to change the social relations—not in order to expand production, but in order to create a more human and sustainable community that fulfilled genuine needs. (Even in Engels’ quote from Principles of Communism he does not advocate perpetual growth, but industrialization to the point at which it would be possible “to satisfy the needs of all.”) There is no evidence of an empty worship of productivism in Marx’s thought. To the contrary, Paul Burkett has provided a fascinating description of “Marx’s Vision of Sustainable Human Development” (MR, October 2005).

It is commonplace for critics of Marx and Engels on ecology to point their finger—as you do here—at the tragedy of the Soviet Union and the damage it inflicted on its environment (in which the Soviet Union, unfortunately, was hardly unique). But the Soviet Union in the 1920s had the most developed ecological science in the world and was extremely advanced in introducing ecological practices. All
of this, however, was obliterated in the subsequent purge under Stalin. This was a tragedy of Marxism no doubt, but not one that could be easily laid at the feet of its classical founders. Some of the key victims of the purges, such as Bukharin, Vavilov, Hessen, and Uranovsky, were leading ecological thinkers as well as Marxists.

As for the rest of your letter, we are in broad agreement. Gandhi’s eloquent statement was one of the earliest expressions of what is today called “the impossibility theorem” of ecology. As we observed in the opening sentences of our book, What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism (Monthly Review Press, 2011—expanded from our earlier article):

Ecological economist Herman Daly is well known for emphasizing what he called the “Impossibility Theorem” of unlimited economic growth in a limited environment. Put, concretely, an extension of a U.S.-style high consumption economy to the entire world of 7 billion people—much less the 9 billion-plus world population projected for the middle of the present century—is a flat impossibility. In this book we are concerned with extending Daly’s Impossibility Theorem by introducing what we regard to be its most important corollary: the continuation for any length of time of capitalism, as a grow-or-die system dedicated to unlimited capital accumulation, is itself a flat impossibility.

Like you we believe that the ecological and social revolution that is necessary to change this situation has its basis first and foremost in the global periphery and what we have called in our book the “environmental proletariat.” But all peoples of the world will need to join in struggle to this same end—if we are to succeed. And to accomplish this they will need a developed critique of capitalism, and a strong commitment to socialism, i.e., a society of substantive equality and sustainable human development.