

# Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory

*Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*

Edited by Antonio Callari  
and David F. Ruccio

Wesleyan University Press 1996  
Published by University Press of New England  
Hanover and London

15

Alain Lipietz

Translated by Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio

## Political Ecology and the Workers' Movement: Similarities and Differences

It is not my intention here to reflect on the connection between ecology and socialism as sociopolitical movements. I have discussed elsewhere (1988, 1992) my own evolution in this respect: from "quality of life [*cadre de vie*]" as a secondary front of the workers' movement to the juxtaposition of formally equal social movements within the "rainbow" coalition and then to the privileging of the "green paradigm" insofar as it includes within it the emancipatory aspirations of the workers' movement.

This evolution from red to green has been a common experience in France. Thus, what I would like to focus on is what there is in common, for many of us, between "the Red" then and "the Green" now, while also underlining the differences and showing how the work of Louis Althusser prepared this passage from Red to Green. By "the Red" and "the Green," I mean real social movements as well as the ideologies, the worldviews, that serve as their more or less loose cement. And there is already a profound similarity: in both cases, we see the demand for unity between a social movement (the workers' movement, the ecological movement) and a theory (Marxism, scientific ecology). Further, for both, this is but a very partial unity. The workers' movement is not reducible to the tendencies of a particular social theory, whether Marxist or not: solidarity and a large part of syndicalism transcend any theoretical references.<sup>1</sup> The same is true for the conservationist and naturalist movements

*Translator's note:* We wish to acknowledge the assistance of Fabien Rocha.

1. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, there is very little relationship between what are called "political ecology" and "deep ecology." Similarly, Marx and Engels's *Manifesto* concluded with a study of "nonsocialist socialisms."

(despite the fact that they are based on the natural sciences) and for environmental movements in general. What is clear is that the movements of *political ecology*, in Europe as well as in America, have recruited largely from among those who have become disenchanted with "scientific socialism."

### Similarities Bordering on Continuity

The similarities between Red and Green are even more visible because, quite often, there was an actual "importing" of Red methods and inspiration into the heart of political ecology. Such was the continuity that we sometimes see convergences that run against the grain, for example, of the Grünen of northern Germany with the ex-Communist party of the German Democratic Republic, the Party of Social Democracy. But this continuity is not only the result of an "infiltration." If a large number of Reds can be found within the Green movement, this is mainly because they have *left* the Red movement; they have broken with even ideally existing "socialism" (I return to this point below). It is also because they recognize a kind of "family likeness" between the early movements of political ecology and their own past. Schematically, what they have found once again, in the Green, are materialism, dialectics, historicism, and a "progressive" orientation.

#### Materialism

Political ecology, like the socialist workers' movement itself, rests on a critique and so on an analysis, a theorized knowledge, of "the order of things."<sup>2</sup> From that standpoint, all utopias can blossom, and all realisms can be flattened. But what the Reds and Greens share, from the start, is a taste for knowing "what is happening." They have the tendency to be encyclopedic, just like the liberals of the eighteenth century.

More specifically, the Reds and Greens focus on a very specific part of reality: the relationship between humanity and nature or, more precisely, the relations among human beings with respect to nature—what Marxists used to call the "forces of production." Certainly, Reds and Greens differ radically in terms of the general way they see these relations: the former think of it mostly in positive terms, the latter in negative terms. The first group extolls the human appropriation of nature; the second group denounces this plundering and, by way of contrast, extolls the self-regulatory capacity of nature in the absence of predatory human practices. For ecologists, only native peoples have an innate capacity for a natural symbiosis: a kind of "primitive sustain-

able development," much as "scientific socialists" used to exalt primitive communism.

We return to this fundamental difference below, but for now let us simply note the similarity of the mental pathologies that derive from this common materialism (and that are not absent from the "second Althusser," of *Reading Capital*<sup>3</sup>):

- The tendency to scientism, forgetting the legitimacy of conflicts of interest among human beings, forgetting politics.
- Extolling a "good" relationship between humans and nature: the cult of "the progress of science and industry" among "orthodox" Marxists, the cult of a "natural equilibrium" among ecologists.
- The will to return to a cybernetics freed of its social, democratic, or conflictual aspects: "to move from the government of people to the administration of things" for Marxists; "a life in harmony with Nature" for the supporters of "deep ecology."

It is amusing to observe how the cult of Gaia—a mystical drift as against the heuristic hypothesis of the same name (it is true, already full of ambiguities) associated with the mathematician and ecologist Lovelock—plays exactly the same role as the Stalinist cult of progress, both among the ecologists who need to believe in it in order to shore up their commitment (the New Age tendency) and among the enemies of political ecology. Even though the cult of Gaia is practically unknown in France, people denounce the idea of subordinating all individualist will to the unreasonable demands of Moloch-Gaia—just as in the past socialism was reduced to Stalinism! This polemic becomes particularly grotesque when it comes from those who hold the view of "progressivism," the "forces of science and industry," such as in the "Heidelberg Manifesto."<sup>4</sup>

#### Dialectics

The materialism of the Greens, like that of the Reds, is in effect much more a *critique* of the actual disorder of things than an extolling of an underlying order or a prefiguring of a new order. Just as the Marxists based themselves on a critique of really existing political economy to guarantee its collapse, ecologists denounce the really existing political ecology to emphasize its unsustainability. In fact, the manner of narrating history is the same in both

3. On the different Althusser, see my article "From Althusserianism to 'Regulation Theory'" (1993).

4. This is a manifesto issued at the beginning of the Rio Conference by some nonecologist French scientists and by some German scientists tied to the chemical industry in order to denounce the "irrationalist ideologies" of the ecologists.

2. Political ecology is a political movement that dared to take its name from the science that rejected it. "Scientific socialism" failed to achieve the same feat.

cases: it consists of a criticism of the structure of reality by real social movements that are themselves the products of the structures against which they struggle.

In an even deeper sense, Greens and Reds join forces when they both insist on the two following themes:

- The theme of “totality”: just as the theory of the workers’ movement was not only a “social economy” but also a global view of social (ideological, political . . .) relationships, so the object of political ecology is not the “environment” but rather totality: humanity, its environment, and the human activities that base themselves on and transform the environment.
- The theme of relations: this totality is conceived as a system, with its own instances and relatively autonomous but mutually constitutive elements.

We can then find in both approaches the complete conceptual paraphernalia of the dialectic and of cybernetics, especially positive feedback loops (the snowball effect) and negative feedbacks (the shock-absorbing or regulatory effect). To be more precise, Greens and Reds share the Althusserian (non-Hegelian) version of the dialectic: the idea that “everything is overdetermined,” the configurations of contradictions in “condensation” and in “repression.” And naturally, we will find the political counterparts: catastrophism and progressivism.

If, in fact, one envisions developments in terms of a snowball effect, then preexisting limits (of humanity, of nature, etc.) will cause a brutal catastrophic stoppage. In this case, it is ridiculous—that is, useless, suspect—to think that one can interfere with an avalanche: it is better to wait and rebuild a better world on the clean slate of the past. On the other hand, if we believe in self-regulatory mechanisms, in the capacity of reality to create its own antidotes, then we will see ourselves as a factor limiting the “disorder produced by market forces” or the tremendous appetites of capitalism and productivism. Eventually, we will even take into account the need to limit our own demands in order not to risk creating, by reacting to the disequilibria, even more serious disequilibria. We will escape the crisis, the “ascent to the extreme” dear to Lenin; we will practice the “politics of the possible”—History, or Gaia, progressing at its own rhythm.

#### *Historicism*

The Greens share with the Reds the belief that they will arrive just in time to see the flight of Minerva’s owl, when a particular form of the order of things

brings us so close to the catastrophe that the Great Change will impose itself: the revolution, the change of paradigm, the new era.

For the workers’ movement, the great form that had to be eliminated was called “capitalism”; for political ecologists, it is called “productivism.” This difference is far from neutral, but who does not see that “productivism” plays for the Greens exactly the same role that “capitalism” played for the Reds? It is what has to be changed in order to change life. In fact, the Greens found it easy to denounce “productivism” when it was a question of condemning both the model of capitalism and the model of the so-called socialist countries. Similarly, Althusser’s school (in particular, Charles Bettelheim) denounced the presence of a “state capitalism” in those “socialisms” so as not to have to discuss the differences between the two models. Now that “socialism” has been reduced to the status of a bad memory, the Greens will increasingly admit that “productivism” and “capitalism” are the same thing.

Productivism or capitalism—in any case it is what brings to a culmination the tensions both in human relations and in the relations between humans and Nature. We have taken a step forward. That is why an ecology movement in politics is growing today just as the workers’ movement did in another time. The historic (or millenarian?) responsibility to fight Armageddon rests with them: yesterday “socialism or barbarism,” today ecology or death.

There is, once again, a common pathology in the similarity of this approach: catastrophism, the arrogance of the prophet, a forgetting of lessons from the past, and a failure to expect the surprises of History, which (as Lenin used to say) has “infinitely more imagination than we have.”

#### *Political Progressivism*

I noted in passing above and want to go back to it: ecology opposes the workers’ movement on the principal point of the “progress of the forces of production.” Although they no longer believe in a materialistic transhistorical movement that can guarantee progress, the Greens nonetheless spontaneously align themselves with all movements, both before and after the workers’ movement, that have tried to emancipate humanity: democracy, socialism (the libertarian wing), third worldism, feminism, regionalism. They thus find themselves fighting the same historical battles as the Reds, denouncing the so-called socialist parties for abandoning their own social priorities (such as the reduction of the working day, resident aliens’ right to vote, etc.).

This continuity does not at all result from an opportunistic expansion of the field of political concerns beyond the “initial cell” of environmentalism. It is quite possible to develop from environmentalism to political ecology and, *therefore*, to a struggle for the reduction of working time and for a new citizenship. But for this to happen, it is necessary to hold onto the “dialectical

and historical materialism" of the Greens along the lines I have suggested above.

Schematically, the Greens are politically progressive because they are against productivism. Therefore, they are for the dominated and against the dominators, that is to say, for the workers (wage laborers and peasants) who revolt against the reduction of their activity to a monetary exchange in a consumerist society. Similarly, they are on the side of the third world against the sacking of the earth, of human beings, and of their cultures by imperialism. To the international and social relations of productivism, they counterpose "sustainable development" or "ecodevelopment," just as the Reds used to counterpose socialism to capitalism.

The political progressivism of the Greens exposes them, of course, to the same difficulties the Reds faced. So we can see the tendency to dichotomize "the good and the bad," "us and them." This tendency can be as easily combined with scientism as it was in "scientific socialism": "we who know" and "the others who claim that they do not know what they are doing." The same goes for the tendency to utopianism, to the ideology of "the New Jerusalem": "Here—within productivism—we cannot do anything because everything is controlled by others. But when we leave this vale of tears, we will be able to build a new world. You will see!"

In sum, the Green has strong similarities with the Red. They are two "models of hope"<sup>5</sup> of a similar matrix: materialist (we begin from a critical knowledge of reality), dialectical (we assume that this reality will create its own materialist critique), historical ("it's time!"), and progressivist. Thus, the Green faces much the same risks as the Red: we have often denounced the "fundamentalism" of the German and French Greens (the precise analogue of "leftism"); soon we will probably deplore their realism (the analogue of the old "opportunism").

### New Foundations

In spite of all this, the Green has a great advantage over the Red: it comes after a century of attempts and mistakes. The Green paradigm is developing on its own basis, which has its own theoretical and practical criticism of the Red paradigm. It is a principle of hope that develops along a similar matrix, but it is not the same matrix. It is a refounding of the principle of hope.

I have already pointed out the fundamental difference between the two matrices: the idea of the "progress of the forces of production" that encom-

passes all other forms of progress is totally absent from the Green paradigm. At worst, political ecology is suspicious of all development of the forces of production (in other words, of any kind of human domination over nature); at best, it admits that a different kind of relationship among human beings could bring about a better relationship between humans and nature. Like Althusserian or Maoist versions of Marxism, political ecology rejects the primacy of the forces of production: it subordinates them to social relationships and to the world vision that inspires them. Political ecology views the relationship between humans and nature not in terms of mastery but of respect (for other human beings, for future generations, even for other species).

The first consequence is immediate: political ecology views in rather negative terms many of the "successes" of socialism—obviously in its Stalinist version ("real socialism" was one of the most barbaric productivisms ever) but also in its "social-democratic" version (the indefinite growth of mass consumption).

This difference over outcomes, or goals, between ecologists and communists is well known; there is no need for further elaboration.

The second consequence is more profound: the Green paradigm is certainly politically progressive but this is not a "progressivism," in the sense that its view of history is not a view of history as progress. In fact, it is not at all a view of history following a path. Just as in Althusser's work, we cannot write history using a "future perfect" ("the past will have prepared the future"). At the most, if history were to be seen as following a path, it would be in accordance with the second principle of thermodynamics: the history of an inexorable growth of entropy, the history of a deterioration. Only a self-critical human consciousness could slow down or reverse this deterioration. Political ecology can only define progress as a direction, characterized by a few ethical or esthetic values (solidarity, autonomy, responsibility, democracy, harmony, etc.), without any material guarantee that the world will, in fact, follow in this direction (as a result of the "socialization of the forces of production.") The Green's dialectical and historical materialism is not teleological; it is even rather pessimistic.

This abandoning of the primacy of the forces of production has another consequence: abandoning the primacy of the producers. If the politically progressive Greens are often on the side of the exploited and the oppressed, that is because their values, their dreams for an ecological world, are opposed to exploitation and oppression. It is not at all because they believe that the producers exploited by productivism are in themselves bearers of a non-productivist consciousness (one can almost hear them whisper: "On the contrary!"). The disorder of the world engenders the formation of critical social movements of resistance, but none of them has primacy over the others, except in its own field. The *autonomous* expression of the interests and goals

5. That is to say, two realizations of Ernst Bloch's "principle of hope," which is itself the ultimate cornerstone of Marxism: see Lipietz (1991).

of each independent social movement is a precondition for their eventual convergence within a Green paradigm, but this convergence (this "condensation," Althusser says) can be only a social and political construction.

Whoever says "political construction" (of the unity of social forces) runs the risk of thinking "construction (of this unity) by politics"—that is to say, by the State and, in the meantime, by the Party. After all, in the workers' movement, that is how the problem was resolved by those who doubted that the working class had the consciousness of its historical mission (the Lenin of *What Is to Be Done?*, the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, and Althusser himself, at least in *Reading Capital*). And this is the danger that lurks for ecological parties: because there is no social movement that bears the ecological consciousness, the party would have to determine, at the right time, what is ecological and what is only "NIMBYst" (the Green equivalent for trade unionist). For example, should we, in the name of the struggle against the greenhouse effect, build a TGV (train à grande vitesse [high-speed train]) line in the Rhone Valley? Should we, in the name of difference, tolerate Islamic scarves in schools? And so on.

Again, the great opportunity for the Greens lies in the fact that they come after the Reds, on the basis of a liberal criticism of "party discipline" and of the almighty state. The principle of autonomy for social movements is not a corrective nor a counterbalance but a constitutive value of the Green paradigm. Direct and participatory democracy, the search for a consensus that integrates divergent points of view, the right to dissent—these values find their roots in a culture that rejects regulation from above. Obviously, there is no guarantee: the same causes (the crumbling of popular aspirations, the complexity of reality) will have a tendency to produce the same effects (the removal of political mediations). But perhaps experience will help us avoid following the same paths.

Even better perhaps, the awareness of the complexity of reality and of the multiplicity of contradictions, the lack of any "last instance determination" in a particular social relationship,<sup>6</sup> the absence of a "central" social movement—all this explains the disappearance among the Greens of a principle that (for the Reds) had been a determinant moment of the historical process: the "taking of power." When asked, "Are you reformists or revolutionaries?" the Greens, even the fundamentalists, do not know how to answer, simply because they do not know what "the" practical point of a "political ecological revolution" would be. They want to change many things, but they do not count on

6. For the Greens, productivism is not simply a social relationship: it is instead a state of mind, a "logic," an understanding of the world, which, although it certainly finds its roots in social relations of production, also acts to mold the relations of production and the orientation of the productive forces. In other words, the "overdetermined complex" is *not*, for the Greens, "in dominance," as it remained for Althusser.

"the" power, the power of the state. It would change neither work relationships nor the mentality of consumers nor gender relations. Being more the heirs of Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari than of Marxism—even the Marxism of Henri Lefebvre or of the first Althusser (*For Marx*)—they undoubtedly dream of an infinity of microchanges, of a molecular revolution that is never finished. They know that, once in power, it is possible to do a number of things: back up struggles, sanction relations of force. But they also know that what is essential lies elsewhere: in changing myriad behaviors.

Political ecology still runs the risk of committing a multitude of errors. However, it is relatively safe from the risk of being entirely swallowed up in *one* monstrous mistake. In this sense, it is, even more than the workers' movement, deeply materialist—a movement of the real, in the real, for the real.

## References

- Lipietz, A. 1988. "Building an Alternative Movement in France." *Rethinking Marxism* 1 (fall): 80–99.
- . 1991. "Les crises du Marxisme: de la théorie sociale au principe d'espérance." In *Fin du Communisme*, ed. J. Bidet and J. Texier. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- . 1992. *Towards a New Economic Order: Postfordism, Ecology, and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1993. "From Althusserianism to 'Regulation Theory.'" In *The Althusserian Legacy*, ed. A. Kaplan and M. Springer, 99–138. London: Verso.