

Ce texte constitue ma réponse au débat suscité chez les “écolomarxistes” américains à la traduction en anglais de mon texte “L’écologie politique et l’avenir du marxisme”.

From Marx to Ecology and Return? A Brief Reply

By Alain Lipietz

It is a rare privilege and a piece of fun to see one's paper at the center of a foreign debate. The first difficulties stem from translation. The work of K.P. Moseley seemed to me quite good, but of course any translation is a trade-off between fidelity to the source and acceptability in the target language. For instance, I learn from Joel Kovel that “paradigm” is “technocratic,” an invitation to “bow,” when used in English. In French, it is a rather preposterously overused tool in political science: a “paradigm” is just a family of connected ideas, unified by some kernel. Basically, my essay intended to outline the similarities and differences between red and green kernels,¹ and also to raise some questions about the possibilities of importing the red kernel into the green paradigm. Indeed, in the French debates around the shift from red to green, “the” question for some French Marxists is, “should we have to enter the green paradigm? Do we enter the Green party with our Marxist paradigm?”

Here we meet a more serious problem: the differences in historical culture and political experiment, which decontextualize the debate. Some of my readers clearly know nothing about the conditions of development of European Green parties, nor about my writing on this and related subjects. That makes their criticisms sometimes pointless.

An example is Paul Burkett's intervention, which could be summarized as: “Lipietz doesn't even see the difference between Marx and Stalin. Just the old Cold War cliché.” This is a good occasion to briefly present the “context” of my paper, as Walter Contreras Sheasby kindly and most usefully presents the U.S. context in his essay.

The European context of the European “Red- to-Green Shift”

In France as in Italy, and in a less clear way in the rest of continental western Europe, Marxism dominated the left from 1945 to 1975. I really mean the left half of the population. Not only were the Communist parties getting about one-quarter of the votes just after World War II; one could also witness demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people unified by deep convictions precisely expressed by the famous letter to Weydemeyer quoted in my text, and which constitute Marx's definition of Marxism. Yes, these people thought that class struggle between workers and capital would lead, through “dictatorship of proletariat” (or, euphemistically, “hegemony of the working class”), to Communism (or, to avoid a confusion with Soviet Union, “to socialism”).

For the same reason, in these countries, criticisms of Stalinism have been at the heart of most Marxist thinking, not “for the last 30 years” as Alan Rudy says, but all through the post-war period and even before. Social Democrats, Councilists, Trotskyists, existentialists, Christian Communists, Macists, Italian operaists, and many others never identified (or identify today) Marxism

¹ More on this can be found in my translated book, *Green Hopes* (Cambridge and New York: Polity Press, Basil Blackwell, 1995). I take this opportunity to signal that some of my work exists in English. In the present reply I will try to quote only this part of my work, especially when loadable through my website <http://perso.club-internet.fr/lipietz>.

and Stalinism.² But that 50 years debate ended in a conviction, common even to many Trotskyists: that one cannot consider Stalinism as a purely illegitimate substitution for Marxism. The worm is not the fruit, but the worm was in the fruit. There was Stalinism in Lenin and Leninism in Marx. The whole history of the New Left in continental Europe consisted in an endless attempt to subtract Stalinism from received Marxism and add in the missing elements: peasantry, Third World, psychoanalysis, subjectivity, urban social movements, feminism, ecology. Marxology was mainly used in order to justify, from Marx's texts, this work of amendment. I don't know most of the U.S.-references quoted by the defenders of "eco-Marxism," but I am sure it is just the same kind of (indeed useful) literature. Amendments themselves were more and more inventive, from the 1960's debate on modes of production (Amin, Balibar, Bettelheim, Palleix, Rey) to the 1970-1980's theoretical developments in the "regulation approach."³ But it was always with the intention of reforming the good old trunk by adding ("articulating," as we used to say) new branches and eliminating rotten ones: the "reformist strategy" so well illustrated by Jim O'Connor as regards political ecology — a strategy that I have been following for all my intellectual life, and that seems to me now insufficient, even though I am quite unable or too lazy to try the breakthrough towards a new paradigm.

I was born intellectually as an "Althusserian-Marxist-Gramscist," and all my Marxist writings or political involvements are "anti-Stalinist." But from 1977 to 1985 these writings and involvements appeared more and more as a mix: an increasingly greater use and development of Marxist tools as an economist, but more and more questioning of the productivist bias in Marx's world-vision. Finally, I entered Green politics in 1986. I was already convinced that, as a Marxist, I had a lot to communicate to the Greens about the analysis of current capitalist societies, about the struggle for cultural hegemony, about the question of alliances, and so on. But I realized that I should not consider ecology as a new "regional" field for the Marxist tool-box.⁴ In fact, ecology, like feminism some years before, had to transform the tool-box, up to the kernel. And that is what my paper is about.

In the meantime, the prestige of Marxism had been destroyed in all Europe (East and West). In Germany, the new flags were green. Many Marxists, but also anarchists, were entering or creating Green parties, with the same epistemological and political questions as mine. Most of us decided that Green should make alliance with the traditional left, though we generally thought them as scandalously right-wing oriented parties (less and less Stalinist or Social Democrat, more and more Social-Liberals). But at the same time, we insist on stressing the differences between ecology and its allies, and ecology's necessary political and intellectual autonomy. That is why, while sometimes accepting the denomination "eco-Marxist," we do not make a flag of it.

Presently, Green parties participate in five European governments in alliance with Socialists. In France, socialists got 22 percent of the vote in the last elections; Greens 10 percent; Communists 7 percent; Trotskyists 6 percent. The social basis of French green votes consists in two peaks (more than 20 percent of the votes): those intellectual workers who make profession of "care" for others (teachers, medical, cultural and social workers), and the excluded or jobless. We get relatively few

² Sheehy badly misreads me when he implies some refusal to "decline to answer questions about Soviet Union," when I try to explain why we can not substitute the beautiful name "communism" to the ugly name "sustainability." If the European Greens are not making reference to "communism," it is not only because of the Stalinist experiment (a too-obvious argument, especially for the Greens of former "socialist" countries). I tried to show that there were serious limits in Marx's blueprint about the future of humankind.

³ See for instance my book *Mirages and Miracles. Fortune and Misfortunes of Global Fordism* (London: Verso, 1987). About my trajectory from Althusser to the regulation approach and to ecology, see my website, item "Concepts et Methodes," various English translations.

⁴ As Alan Rudy has noted, here I use "regional" in the sense of a particular field within historical materialism, and not as "about regions" in geography. Yet, my professional researches in regional economics induced me into a more and more enlarged version of historical materialism and helped me to move politically from red to green. See my website, item "Economie regionale."

votes from manual workers (11 percent among industrial workers) but we get more votes than any other left party among peasants. The bosses, yuppies and retired persons only give us four percent of their votes. But we plan to "invade" this category in a few years). The three parties with the most votes are represented in Lionel Jospin's government and the role of the Greens was decisive in the adoption of Jospin's first main reforms: the reduction of weekly labor time to 35 hours,⁵ the rule of "parity" in elections (as many women as men), and the creation of a new institution besides marriage (the PACS) open to heterosexual or homosexual pairs. The ten years of debate required to impose these reforms on "Marxist" allied parties were clear confirmation that our ideas about progress were not exactly theirs!

With all this caveat, back to the critics.

Precisions and developments

Of Burkett, I have few words. His polemic is mainly with Benton. My point is that I disagree with Marx's kernel about the single structuring role of production relations in the definition of "the enemy," of the leading force in social change, in the definition of the goal of our struggles. Burkett, as others, may contest that this is Marx's kernel. The idea that Marx was blind about "what he had contributed to" is acceptable in Marxology. But not if we consider the permanent and structuring role of the "letter to Weydemeyer" kernel in Marx's philosophical and political public messages. I did not restrict myself to *Das Kapital*. I quoted examples from the 1844 Manuscripts to his Critique of the Gotha Program. This is what I call productivism in Marx. Now, I perfectly agree with Burkett that we "need to know capitalist productivism's laws of motion."⁶ And though I am most dubious that "capitalism's exploitative and alienating development of the relations and forces of production paradoxically creates the potential for more humanly fulfilling relations between human beings and their natural conditions" (the typical teleological productivism that constitutes the common kernel between Marx and Stalin, and that is the target of my paper!), I agree that we ecologists have to say more about the struggles towards a sustainable model of production.⁷

This is probably the main thing that makes me stop and think about the very instructive Sheasby paper. Clearly, the European Greens warmly support the strategy of alliance between Nader's Greens and workers' movements. And contrary to what Sheasby thinks, I do believe that "the emancipation of the working class will be the act of the working class itself." But I deny that this emancipation *per se* would emancipate women as such, or create a sustainable model of development. Other points in Sheasby's analysis of the transformation in labor process puzzle me. (See my "Post-Fordist World...") Clearly, once again the context matters: the evolution of labor and social movements is not the same in Europe as in the U.S. In Europe, alienation lies increasingly in "what we do," and, for a growing (non-majority) number of workers, less and less in "how we do it." Several Green meetings were physically attacked by highly-skilled workers — communist activists — in the nuclear industry.

Sheasby's positive vision of red-green alliances (which I basically share) leads him to classical excesses (the friends of my enemies...), as in his positive vision of the U.S. Green's unanimous opposition to military intervention in Kosovo, which he identifies as radical anti-imperialism. In Europe the debate is much more complex, and split not only the Green parties but many individuals.

⁵ On the difficult conversion of traditional left-wing parties to this objective, and the Green blueprint for this reform, see my book *La Société en sablier* (Paris: La Découverte, new edition 1998). (The 1996 edition was largely used in the Socialist-Greens negotiation).

⁶ See my translated works on present capitalist models of production such as: "The Post-Fordist World: Labour Relations, International Hierarchy and Global Ecology," *Review of International Political Economy*, 4, 1, Spring, 1997.

⁷ For the past, see my "Sustainable Development: History and Challenges," *Politics-Poetics. Documenta X: The Book* (Ostfildern-Ruit [Germany]: Cantz-Verlag). On the future, see my report to OECD: "Working for World Ecological Sustainability: Towards a New Great Transformation," *The Future of the Global Economy: Towards A Long Boom?* (Paris: OECD, 1999). Both texts are in English on my website.

because Kosevo opposed two genuine green values: non-violence and anti-racism. For ten years, European Greens had called for a civilian intervention in Kosevo and other Muslim regions of ex-Yugoslavia to stop ethnic cleansing. Then, after Srebrenica, a majority of Dutch, German or French Greens called for a military rescue operation. This position was supported not only by the Kosevar Greens, but eventually by Rugova (the Balkan's Gandhi) and by the Serbian Green Party (and also some Serbian feminists), who, from under the bombs, sent us extraordinary emails. The fact that the bombs fall from "good" or "bad" hands is here irrelevant. It makes the U.S. Green's position more courageous and anti-nationalist, not necessarily better. As for the hypocrisy of condemning Milosevic without raising a little finger to stop his fist, this was absolutely common among European reds.⁸

But let us go back to our way to the future. Space is lacking here to expose to Joel Kovel what is nowadays blurred by the opposition "reform-revolution." I think that the Greens are more radical than the Communists, in that the former want to change the very content of production (processes and products), only the share of gains and power. But they are "reformist" in that they want to start immediately (even "within capitalism") and do not think that the conquest of political power will change our difficulties that much. Clearly, new "collective forms of property" will have to be invented or developed. In France, the cooperative movement, the mutualists, the "third sector," make political reference to the Greens more often.⁹ But this does not mean that the form of collective property is essential.¹⁰ Since the end of the 19th century many of these forms developed as reformist, within capitalist society, and some became clearly competitive and productivist. What makes the difference is the spirit of the leadership and of the communities involved in these experiments. As Joel Kovel puts it correctly, the cooperativist form of production makes them free of the compulsion for competitive accumulation. But their choices of production come from their "overriding quantum of faith, their spiritual energy." Because they are Christian-communists? Christianity as the future of Eco-Marxism? I wouldn't go so far.

A few words about the other texts, which have an implicit understanding of what an essay coming from another language and another continent could mean. Daniel Faber and Allison Grosman illustrate or develop my text in a better way than I could have done myself, showing that differences in culture and historical experiment is not a real problem when referring to real involvements. And they correctly spot one of the first international meeting points of ecologists, feminists, workers of all continents: facing the World Trade Organization. Surely this is the best illustration of "transformative political ecology." Now that the enthusiasm of victory (Seattle) is vanishing, it is clear that contradictions between productivism (even progressive and Marxist) and ecology will arise about "what new world economic order do we want?"

There are not only, as Alan Rudy implies, the problems stemming from the differences between the simple paradigmatic kernel in Marx and the concrete analysis of concrete situations, as in Lenin for instance. True, the debates on modes of production and regulation may find an application in the negotiation "after Kyoto"¹¹ on global warming. The point is that the very vision of "What is progressive? What should we agree upon?" is still contested, and on a contested terrain that too frequently opposes Marxists and ecologists. Examples: should we impose the "polluter-pay"

⁸ With a lot of individual exceptions! As a communist worker told me, "I voted CP as usual, but my son voted for you and I am proud of it, because you had the correct anti-fascist position." (The European election occurred in the last days of the war.)

⁹ And in particular to my writings. See my web, unfortunately mostly in French, on these topics ("Chroniques et débats," "Relations et politiques sociales"). Or one chapter in, *Towards a New Economic Order: Postfordism, Ecology, Democracy* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, Polity, 1992).

¹⁰ My French text said "en son meque!" I admit "it is not the point!" would have been a better translation than "it is a joke!"

¹¹ See my already quoted contribution to OECD and "Enclosing the Global Commons: Global Environmental negotiations in a North-South Conflictual Approach," by Bhaskar and Andrew Glyn, eds., *The North, the South, and the Environment* (London: Earthscan, 1995).

principle to wage-earners? If a Christiancooperative à la Kovel invents a genetically modified germs doubling the productivity of corn, should it be allowed to be put into circulation? What do we think of Anil Agarwal's project of tradable emission permits? and so on.

But I truly agree with Rudy on the richness of the tools within the Marxist heritage. Let us note the example of value theory. Taking seriously Capital, Volume 1, Chapter 1, and Theories on Surplus Value (last chapters on the transformation between "innerrelations" and "external connections"), I have shown that the so-called "transformation problem" goes far beyond the conservation of equations in the 1970s Morishima controversies (yes, they hold!)¹² In fact, prices express a compound of social relations while value expresses only the social division of labor within the market relations. Using Chomsky's second theory of transformative grammar (after all, as Marx puts it, "value is the language of commodities"), I admitted that these social relations could be expressed directly in the system of prices with a secondary effect upon the system of values, and hence on socially necessary labor. Rent transforms the system of prices, and rent expresses nothing else than a juridical right on or to environment (just as do ecotaxes and quotas). Now, suppose there is an island with only one agricultural activity and three classes (workers, capitalists and land-owners). The Volume III equations will hold. But the system of values will no more be given its traditional priority. Rents (or their later transformed expression into land price, quotas, etc.) will express an inner relation this is perhaps more important than labor's productivity: the differences in the charge capacities of the various ecosystem of the island. "Capital" is no more "the general" — as in Marxist tradition — than the struggle for the access to the rich ecosystems. There, a regional field of Marxism (price theory) provides a tool which permits one to imagine a generalized theory of historical materialism, encompassing Marxism and ecological economics.

As Rudy puts it correctly, I prefer nowadays to "operate at a realm below those of the level of abstraction at which both Marx and O'Connor work in their theoretical texts." That is my provisional refuge, where I find elements to guide my "radical democratism," as a more and more "professional politician," that is a man doing the go-between from social movements to institutions.

But fortunately new generations are arising. Frank Ackerman immediately jumps from this idea of an "enlarged theory of value" to the challenge of a General Theory of Political Ecology. Hurray!



¹² See my book, *The Enchanted World* (London: Verso, 1985).