

---

**Ces textes constituent la réponse d’“ écolomarxistes ” américains à la [traduction en anglais de mon texte “ L’écologie politique et l’avenir du marxisme ”. J’ai répondu à leur critiques.](#)**

## **Alain Lipietz and the Crisis of Political Ecology\***

*By Joel Kovel*

Alain Lipietz has written a provocative essay on the “future of Marxism” in relation to political ecology, defined as “the only movement that can really...transform reality, on the basis of theoretical analysis, through militancy and political struggle.” The backdrop is the breakdown of Marxism in light of the collapse of socialism, and its reappropriation by the ascendant doctrine, political ecology, to which many disaffected socialists have flocked.

No one should doubt the central importance of the matters Lipietz raises; and his expert, insightful judgment casts a great deal of light on the complexities of our time. I do have, however, a rather basic disagreement with the way certain fundamentals are posed. In what follows I will not be addressing the question of whether Marx was, so to speak, already an ecological thinker and therefore readily appropriable by political ecology, or similar discourses. I have some problems with Lipietz’s treatment of this theme (e.g., too readily conflating Marx with Freud as an espouser of the domination of nature), but I certainly agree with his intent of taking nothing for granted. It was the young Marx who said that we should not fear ruthless criticism, even — especially — of our own assumptions. But the same should hold toward Lipietz on Marx.

Lipietz wants to separate “Marxism” from the question of “Marxology.” The latter is what intellectuals can learn from, or about, the actual figure of Marx; the former is an “application” of Marx, which is variously described as a “way of thinking,” a “compass,” and a “guide” for political ecology.

However, the distinction between Marxism and Marxology is not one honored by Lipietz himself, who frequently resorts to readings of what Marx actually meant as criteria for judging the trajectory of Marxism.

If this is so, then room must be admitted for the often-quoted remark of Marx that he was no Marxist — and was glad of it.

This in turn suggests that there is something missing in the notion of *Marxism* — and also of *Marxology* — something which tells us that these two terms cannot, so to speak, encompass the universe of what “marx” signifies. The words, or rather, their suffixes, indicate as much. All “isms” are by definition partial failures that represent imperfect praxes. Similarly, “ologies” are knowledge claims made by situated thinkers, likewise partial. Critical appropriation is needed in all cases, and in any case, there may be something to “marx” that no “ism” or “ology” can get at. Further, the method chosen to study Marxism and Marxologies alike can affect the understanding.

Here is where my problem emerges with Lipietz, who seems to apply a wrecking ball approach to the subject, viz: “the general structure, the intellectual scaffolding of the Marxist paradigm, along with the key solutions it suggests, must be jettisoned.” From the rubble, we need to rebuild a new

---

\*In the March *CNS* we published an essay by the internationally respected French economist, Alain Lipietz, titled “Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism” (translated by *CNS* associate K.P. Mosely). We then invited six *CNS* Editors to comment on the article. Lipietz agreed to take time out from his present busy schedule as a leading Green representative to the European Parliament to “reply to critics.”

materialist paradigm, recycling parts from the “ruins of the old Marxist paradigm.”

There is something beyond a constructive ruthlessness here in assuming that Marx or Marxism can be wrecked, then reassembled, as though made of legoblocks. This reductive attitude is carried forward into some of the key terms employed by Lipietz. Since when is the kernel of Marx a “paradigm”? Why must we bow down before this technocratic word, with its instrumental associations? No doubt, every “ism” has its prevailing operating system, or paradigm; no doubt, too, its weaknesses can be seen concentrated in this. And no doubt, then, that this approach is necessary in evaluating the status of Marxism. But it is by no means sufficient.

Why not look deeper than the instrumental paradigm, for the *theory* of Marx, as a kind of vision, or even a certain *spirit* of Marx? Aspects such as these are lost in Lipietz’s method, which could be seen as akin to reducing the study of bodies to an enumeration of the proportions contained therein of various molecules. More pressingly, this piecemeal reductionism leads to a conformist, tepid reading of Marx that violates certain key historical relations and vitiates his relevance to the struggle to overcome the ecological crisis.

Marxism is called the “precious theoretical heritage” of labor. But Marx was not, first of all, the theoretician of labor. He began with philosophy in the shape of the Hegelian dialectic, then emancipated this from Hegelian idealism by grounding it in labor — because he wanted to emancipate labor, too. Marx began, then, with *aspirit of emancipation*, of revolution, which he wanted to realize. He saw this in Hegel’s dialectic — because, as he could still write, in 1873, in the Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, that the dialectic, properly transformed and made materialist, “is in its essence critical and revolutionary” — in other words, even at the close of his productive life, Marx continued to affirm this core value.

Of course, Marx did not want to reify “philosophy” as something standing above the world. He did, however, want to advance that state of being signified by the “critical and revolutionary” dialectic. It was a way of taking in the whole, of grasping the concrete forces animating that whole, and of intervening so as to universalize and transform the whole. This impulse cannot be derived from “labor,” or any other particular, socially configured movement — political ecology included. It provided rather Marx’s way of transforming the movement from labor — as in our time it can transform political ecology.

Lipietz shares some of this ambition: he wants, like Marx, to put the dialectic back on its feet. But then he comes forward with a remarkably weak criterion for doing so: “Marxists have only changed the world in various ways; what matters now is to avoid any more mistakes.” This is a prescription for inertia, the only condition in which mistakes are avoided. Lipietz’s inversion of the Eleventh Thesis puts the dialectic neither on its head nor feet, but on its knees. And it correlates with a ruling out in advance of those questions which still need to be asked if society is to be transformed.

According to Lipietz, there is a “false debate between ‘revolution’ and ‘reform.’” Following this, he finishes his paragraph with a lament that we know nothing about abolishing the order of things. I should guess so, if he is not willing to engage the difference between these two categories. Actually, that is not quite accurate. There is no explicit engagement in Lipietz’s text between revolution and reform. However, since the revolutionary impulse is also obscurely linked in this passage with the “criminal thrust of so much of 20th century Marxism,” we may surmise that Lipietz’s political sentiments, like his view of dialectic, are implicitly reformist rather than revolutionary. No wonder Lipietz wishes to disassemble the components of revolutionary socialism, then put them back together again. No wonder, too, that the result is a lifeless mannequin — or that his reading of political ecology as “transformative” is constantly qualified and hedged until it loses all force.

The problem here is pervasive among those who share in the global struggle against the degradation of humanity and nature. It is as though they are still in shock over the collapse of first-epoch socialism, still bemused by the triumphalism of capital. They end their vision, therefore, at

exactly that point at which it needs to begin — with the break with traditional socialism and the imagining of a “next-epoch,” ecological socialism. Perhaps I didn’t read Lipietz carefully enough, but this category is never found linked in his text to the project of political ecology. Political ecology seems to stand in where eco-socialism is meant to be, but it never names the place it occupies, or admits its true, revolutionary debt to the spirit of Marx.

This whole line of development is foreclosed late in Lipietz’s essay when he refuses to confront the fundamental socialist principle of collective ownership of the means of production. To Lipietz, such a question is off the board: “yet today, after a century of setbacks for every possible variant of collective property, ‘common ownership’ is a joke!” Forgive me for a defective sense of humor, but to me, this “joke” puts the seal of reformism upon the political ecology movement, and denies it the *transformative social action* Lipietz claims.

In any case, the statement is empirically false. There are all kinds of experiments in collective property, of greatly varying content and value for eco-socialism. To take just one, local example, the significance of which few people have tried to appreciate: There are, in the region where I live, a number of “Christian-communist” settlements, known as the fellowship of the Bruderhof. Yes, communist, professedly so — although the fellowship happens to own factories where they manufacture certain high value commodities such as educational aids for handicapped children. These factories compete successfully in a capitalist market, while being free from the compulsion to constantly expand market share or profitability that marks the standard corporation. And why? Because they are communist, and attempt to put into practice communist relations of production. That is, there is no value extracted from the exploitation of abstract social labor; minimal and flexible hierarchy obtains in the workplace, with a great deal of self-regulation and no punching of the clock; finally, the pay scale is equal, in that everybody receives nothing — no wage at all, since the workers and their community (or to be more exact, the Fellowship, and as they would put it, Christ) are the collective owners, and simply draw upon the proceeds of the firm to meet basic needs, turning the surplus to radical political agitation.

Yes, yes, there is much more to it, in particular, the requirement of an overriding quantum of faith, or spiritual energy, to offset egoistic selfishness and the corrosive effects of the surrounding society. Whether this can be generalized is a real problem; whether it is even desirable is another. But do not call it a joke; rather engage in the hard work of exploring and developing such possibilities. This is essential. For I have yet to see a cogent argument that the rule of capital can be overcome so long as bourgeois property is intact — nor that the ecological crisis can be overcome so long as capital is intact. It is also essential to say that it was Karl Marx who taught us how to think this way, and whose spirit continues to inspire that we might realize it.

# The Political Ecology of Marxism

By Daniel Faber and Allison Grossman

Alain Lipietz argues that the proletariat “has been rent asunder,” and can no longer be regarded as the “principal directing force for the abolition of the existing order of things.” Instead, the “only movement that can claim to guide transformative social action is political ecology.” For Lipietz, the father of the French regulation school, the disorganization of the working class has created a profound crisis for Marxist theory and socialist politics. But political ecology, as currently constituted, also confronts limitations which only the left can help overcome. Thus, Lipietz comes to ask his central question: “How can Marxism contribute to political ecology?” His answer: “I am convinced...that Marx and Marxism can contribute immensely to political ecology, by virtue of the progressive, dialectical, and historicist character of their ideas.” But, “the general structure, the intellectual scaffolding of the Marxist paradigm, along with the key solutions it suggests, must be jettisoned; virtually every area of Marxist thought must be thoroughly reexamined in order to really be of use.”

Lipietz suggests that a more cautious approach, based upon “pruning the dead or rotten branches, relaxing overly strong hypotheses, enriching an unchanged central core with secondary revisions,” is insufficient. Rather, the reformation of Marxism might be accomplished via “a radical substitution of paradigm; reconstructing materialism around a new intellectual frame, using parts recycled from the ruins of the old Marxist paradigm.” This new framework would be “Marxist-Polanyian,” and under “the general rubric of radical democracy, this could embrace the various autonomous social movements, along with their specific contradictions, even while recuperating on a ‘regional’ basis the insights and spirit of the Marxian approach.” From here, Lipietz explores avenues for such reconstruction by taking up questions of *value* (the exploitation of labor vs. nature), *agency* (labor vs. political ecology), and *vision* of the future (socialism vs. radical democracy).

Clearly, a marriage between neo-Marxism and political ecology is highly desirable, if not a political necessity, if the transformation to a socially just and sustainable way of life is ever to occur. Against those critics who would completely dismiss Marxism, a critically important first step in such a courtship, as taken up by such Marxists as Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster, would be to demonstrate that an ecological sensibility is present in Marx[ism]. As stated by James O’Connor, “Marx and Engels and a number of Marxist theorists viewed (and today view) human history and natural history as dialectically interconnected; understood (and understand) the anti-ecological nature of capitalism and the need for a theory that articulates the contradictory relationship between exchange value and use value; and had (and have) at least a latent ecological socialist vision.” Without a full grasp of the class-based and ecological antagonisms inherent in the capitalist mode of production, as provided by Marxism and socialist theory, political ecology will likely embrace self-limiting and perhaps even regressive movement-building strategies and solutions. But against those Marxists who are completely dismissive of their critics, it must also be acknowledged that Marx and traditional socialist thought lacks a fully developed ecological sensibility adequate to the task of contemporary environmentalism. Therefore, a number of profound problematics relating to the ecological question continue to haunt historical materialism, including a rather anthropocentric lack of appreciation for the relative autonomy of ecological processes and the subjectivity of nature. For a truly egalitarian marriage to occur, a second significant step must take place, namely, what Ted Benton has termed “the Greening of Marxism.”

1. Questions of Value: The Exploitation of Labor and Nature: Ever since Frederick Engels

encouraged Marx to ignore the work of the Ukrainian socialist Sergei Podolinski, who attempted to make the labor theory of value consistent with bio-physical laws, a deep schism has developed between Marxism and political ecology. This division is highly unfortunate, because processes of capitalist accumulation and development reflect a complex interaction between the physical laws and political-economic forces that constrain and enable production.

From the perspective of political ecology, labor is not the primary, self-renewing force described by Marxists, in the sense of creating or recycling its own energy. Energy cannot be created by labor or physical capital, but instead must be recovered from the environment. Just as labor is needed to produce labor, energy is needed to recover new supplies of energy from the environment. And under capitalism (or any mode of exploitation), just as labor can produce more goods and services than needed for its own reproduction (surplus labor), energy can be used to recover an even greater amount from the environment (surplus energy). For Marxists, the creation of wealth (measured as exchange-value) under capitalism is achieved via the exploitation of labor, the extraction of surplus-labor from human nature. For political ecologists, the creation of wealth (measured as use-values) under capitalism has been achieved via the exploitation of nature, the extraction of surplus-energy from mother nature. For Marxists, the result is an immiseration of the working class (poverty, extinction of cultural systems, etc.), and the advent of economic crisis stemming from a gulf between the productive forces and social relations of production (internal limits to capital). For political ecology, the result is an immiseration of nature (increased entropy, the extinction of species and ecological systems, etc), and the advent of economic crisis stemming from a gulf between productive forces/social relations of production on the one hand, and the conditions of production, on the other (external limits to growth).

Marxism can clearly benefit from a biophysical analysis, just as political ecology can benefit from a political-economic analysis, of capitalist production and accumulation. One task among many is to sublimate the law of value emphasized in Marxism with the second law of thermodynamics emphasized in political ecology. For instance, one of the primary means by which relative surplus value, or the productivity of labor per unit of time, has been increased over the last century or more has been through dramatic increases in the amount of non-living energy consumed by capital (which is used to supplement the muscle of living labor, measured as energy use per worker-hour). The result is the so-called petrochemical revolution in capitalist industry and agriculture, with all the attendant adverse environmental externalities: toxic waste dumping; pesticide contamination of our land, water, and food; increased air pollution by fossil fuels; and global warming. In this manner, economic crisis tendencies become displaced to the realm of nature, assuming the form of ecological crisis tendencies; while the economic health of the working class is secured through the sacrifice of their environmental health.

The reluctance of Marxism to adequately incorporate political ecology into the law of value is reflective of a larger problematic within historical materialism, namely a lack of recognition for the subjectivity and/or relative autonomy of nature. This is reflected in the theoretical privilege which Marx ascribes to exchange-value over use-value. As stated by O'Connor, "Marx unquestionably failed to systematically problematize (i.e., evaluate in terms of their real utility to individuals and society) capitalist productive forces (and use-values generally) in *Capital* or in any other work." In the thinking of socialist eco-feminists such as Mary Mellor and Val Plumwood, neo-Marxism wounds itself by its unwillingness to theoretically integrate women and nature as *subjects* rather than mere objects in the economic system. The irreducible autonomy of both "nature's economy" and the "household economy" is either ignored or downplayed in standard Marxist historical accounts, despite the central role which both women and natural forces play in the production and reproduction of the material conditions of life. Biased with an androcentric view of class "his-story" as "male producers of exchange-value," conceptions of women and nature as having "ends in themselves" or reasons for existence outside their utility to "man-the-creator," are

marginalized. "Her-story" is lost. The eco-feminist project is also essential to the task of uniting Marxism and political ecology.

2. Questions of Agency: Class Struggle and New Social Movements: The characterizations of political ecology presented by Lipietz seem heavily influenced by his roots in the Greens and new social movements of the European social-democratic countries, particularly Germany and France. Theoretically, the European Greens are more closely associated with "post-materialism," whereby the transformation from Fordist to post-Fordist modes of accumulation is resulting in a decline in traditional trade-union occupations devoted to mass production in favor of more knowledge-based, service-oriented economies oriented to the salariat. This expanding "new middle-class" of professionals and white/pink collar workers have grown up politically in the long postwar period of peace and more or less steady economic growth. Their experiences of increased material well-being have created a liberatarian shift in society from material to postmaterial values, with an emphasis on value participation, self-actualization and aesthetic needs more than material wealth and its distribution. Postmaterialism is thus linked to a decline in economic and class-based issues, and to the increased salience of life-style and political issues, central among which is political ecology and environmental quality.

There may be some significant problems with the above formulation, and the picture as painted by Lipietz. In most advanced and developing capitalist countries, there exist many different sectors of environmental activism, even among working-class populations. In the U.S. there is significant evidence that class-based environmental politics is becoming *more* relevant, not less so.

In order to bolster profits and competitiveness, capital typically exploits nature in ways which are not only most cost efficient, but also politically viable. The less political power a community possesses to offer resistance, the more likely they are to experience arduous environmental and human health problems at the hands of capital and the state. And in the U.S., as in most countries, it is the least politically powerful segments of the popular classes — oppressed peoples of color, poor working class communities, industrial blue-collar workers, farmers and farmworkers, and undocumented immigrants — that bear the greatest ecological and human health burden. This is not to argue that the salariat is not also significantly impacted, because they, too, are being harmed. But one of the typical outcomes of American "middle-class" ecological activism is the pattern of addressing some single-issue environmental and human health problems for the general population by transforming the ecological hazard into another form, from one site to another, and from more affluent sectors to less powerful segments of the popular classes at home and abroad. The reaction at the base has been a revitalized grassroots activism by labor and community-based movements for environmental justice.

In the new post-Fordist age of globalization, a period in which social and environmental injustices are growing worse, it may be that class-based politics may reemerge, but in a powerfully new form. If increased profits are the economic engine pulling the train of business in the world economy of the 1990s, then the increased exploitation of nature is providing the energy powering the locomotive. Neoliberal politicians stand at the controls, having engineered a decline or loss of political power by organized labor, environmentalists, and other progressive social movements. The process of capital restructuring, which neoliberalism has helped facilitate, is responsible for the deterioration in ecological and working/living conditions worldwide. The hardships of both workers and their environment are thus two sides of the same political-economic coin and are now so dialectically related (if not essential) to one another as to become part of the same historical process — the restructuring and globalization of capitalism. As a result, the issues of social-economic justice and ecological justice have surfaced together as in no other period in world history. The "Battle in Seattle" last fall, in which labor, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, women's movements, farmers, and consumer product safety advocates combined to disrupt the World Trade Organization meetings, may be symptomatic of the transformative political ecology to which Lipietz

refers. Our view is that labor, and a more inclusive, internationalist, comprehensive class-based politics (particularly in terms of the critique of corporate power and the dynamics of capitalism as a mode of production) is essential to this process. As demonstrated by the Labor-Neighbor Project, one of the most impressive environmental victories in recent years brought together a powerful coalition between the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers and labor, the environmental justice movement, and community-based activists in the “Cancer Alley” area of Louisiana. The task for the environmental justice movement is to reach out to the salariat (and vice-versa), universalize the content of their demands, and form a broad-based coalition in concert with other progressive/left social movements.

3. Questions of Vision: Socialism and Radical Democracy: Lipietz is right to argue that political ecology is facilitating a new type of politics. We agree that struggles for radical democracy are key to overcoming the root causes of social and ecological crises. And while radical democracy is not socialism, it may one day prove to be a precondition for the emergence of a viable democratic ecosocialist politics. As witnessed in the legacy of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, China, and other communist countries, one of the great lessons of history is that state *ownership* of the means of production *without* genuine democratic social *control* by the people is doomed to be a political and ecological failure. In light of the abuses of power previously carried out under systems of party/bureaucratic political rule in state socialist countries, it is clear that the ideals of radical democracy are central to a revitalization of the socialist project.

Likewise, given the ecological contradictions and exploitive class relations prevalent under a capitalist mode of production, a genuine ecological democracy can only be fully constructed in a socialist society. Radical democracy may equalize formal rights of citizenship and equal participation in decision-making structures, but it does not in-and-of-itself eliminate differentiated class interests and tensions. True “social governance of the means of production” and long-term democratic environmental planning based on human need requires social ownership over key sectors of the economy. In this sense, the ideals of socialism are integral to the construction of a viable radical democracy, even though socialism does not guarantee the realization of these democratic-ecological ideals. Class interests under socialism must come to be represented via a variety of mechanisms, movements, and institutions. Radical socialist democracy should insure that those who labor inside the factory, those who reside in households and communities outside the factory, and those who consume the products produced by the factory, all share in the economic planning process and administration of society. In this regard, a socialist pluralism would imply a broadening of traditional conceptions of class to include other issues of power and oppression as presented by political ecology, the women’s movement, civil and human rights, consumer product safety advocates, and other social movements of a genuine civil society.

## If We Had a Theory of Political Ecology, What Would it Look Like?

By Frank Ackerman

“Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism,” is evocative and thought provoking for those who share the intellectual history of migration from Marxist social movements to ecological circles. The similarities between the two worlds, in their critical stance toward existing society and in their progressive political orientation, are striking. In my own experience as a dissident economist I found there to be a remarkable parallel in spirit, and sometimes in substance, between the early days of the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) in the 1970s and the first years of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE) in the early 1990s.

Lipietz takes us a long way toward understanding the theoretical basis for the similarities between Marxism and political ecology, as movements and as ideologies. I will not dwell on the numerous points on which I agree with him. Yet at the end of his essay, I was looking for something more. The beginning of the essay persuaded me that rather than focusing again on the successes and failures of Marxism (as he does in later sections), we should be attempting to create a comparable theory of political ecology. That theory might use the same tools and concepts when appropriate, but would look fundamentally new and different.

To that end, it is important to examine the areas in which a theory of political ecology will require new departures. I want to consider four such areas, inspired by a reading of Lipietz: the theory of value; the theory of crises; the analysis of social movements and political change; and the vision of an ideal society.

1. Labor, Lumber, and Scarcity: Marxism has a unitary theory of value, based on labor, which is seamlessly connected to the analysis of historical dynamics, the role of the working class as the leading agent of change, and the vision, however sketchy it remains, of an ideal, post-capitalist society. A single source of value leads to a single fulcrum for historical change and political action, and to an inspirational vision of the future.

Political ecology presumably still accepts the notion that labor is an important source of value, but no longer the sole source. Lipietz notes that society may add eco-taxes to the price of commodities, reflecting social concern for other values, but this is only the surface manifestation of a deeper point. A focus on ecology identifies at least two radically un-Marxian sources of value in the natural world. First, the biological growth of renewable resources, like the reproduction of labor power, creates new (ecological and economic) value in excess of its cost of production. By analogy with Marxism, this leads to what could be called as the “lumber theory of value.”<sup>1</sup> If and when there is a transition to a sustainable economy, renewable resources of biological origin will become of increasing importance as sources of materials and energy.

Second, there are vital resources that are available only in fixed supply, such as nonrenewable mineral and fossil fuel resources, or the absorptive capacity of the atmosphere, oceans, and other ecosystems. As Herman Daly and others have pointed out, this gives rise to a definite, fixed scale which production (and population) cannot sustainably exceed, a limitation which is equally alien to Marxist and bourgeois economic traditions. In fact, ecological limits create problems of relative scarcity, the one category of problems which conventional economics elevates above all others. As in textbook stories, those resources that are scarcest, relative to demand, must be considered to be most valuable. However, the scarcities of the natural environment, and the “shadow prices” that might reflect them, are a far cry from the scarcities of the market and the actual prices of a capitalist economy.

---

<sup>1</sup>This is discussed briefly in Frank Ackerman, “The Natural Interest Rate of the Forest,” *Ecological Economics*, May, 1994.



We now have at least three distinct sources of value for a theory of political ecology: labor, as in Marxist theory; the growth of renewable resources; and the natural limits of scarce nonrenewable resources and fixed carrying capacity. This is a more realistic, yet more diffuse and eclectic theory, compared with the powerful, unified analysis of classical Marxism.

2. The Varieties of Crisis: In Marxism the theory of value and the analysis of historical dynamics led to a theory of capitalist crisis. Here the resonance with ecological theory may be greatest, as the threat of environmental crisis has played a major role in the rise of environmental consciousness and activism. As Lipietz notes, the two schools of thought rely on quite different models of social dynamics. Nonetheless, the tone of the theories, the moral power of the call to action, is similar. Business as usual will lead inexorably to crisis, both theories tell us; only through protracted, organized political struggle can it be averted. This familiar refrain is, I suspect, a large part of why so many Marxist veterans feel at home in ecological circles.

Yet in comparison to Marxism, the projection of ecological crisis is multi-faceted and diffuse. The elaborate Marxist analyses of crisis often led to scholarly and partisan debate; many variants of Marxist crisis theory have not withstood the test of time. Nonetheless, there was a relatively unified theoretical framework from which such theories emerged.

Ecological crisis, in contrast, is a broad range of technologically driven disaster stories, available with many different villains and plotlines. One well-known story involves local toxic waste and pollution crises, on the Love Canal model. Another centers on the loss of biodiversity and the extinction of species. A third concerns global warming and the threat of adverse climate change. Can we say anything useful about the common causes and characteristics of these three modes of crisis? They appear to be connected only at a very high level of abstraction—perhaps reflecting the more eclectic theoretical basis for political ecology. Moreover, the stories of ecological crisis cannot entirely be subsumed into a neo-Marxist analysis of capitalist crisis; local ecological devastation is all too compatible with profitable capitalist expansion.

3. Movement Without Class, Practice Without Theory: There is no doubt in Marxist theory about the primary agency for change, nor about the source of the potential power and consciousness of the working class. Recent events have, alas, been less than kind to this theory of political change. Lipietz explores some of the possible reasons for the failure of the Marxist analysis of the working class; in this discussion I think his thinking may remain too tightly connected to recent Western European experience.

A more serious problem is that his discussion is too little connected to the analysis of environmental movements. If we are to create a theory of political ecology analogous to Marxism, we need to answer a different question: who are all those green activists and where do they come from? The environmental movement is as successful as any progressive effort of recent years, yet we have no comprehensive theory about why this has happened and who has become involved.

The environmental movement is not a class-based phenomenon in any simple terms. Nor is it always based on any other readily identifiable category of self-interest. Of the three examples of ecological crisis introduced above, only the first, involving local toxic waste and pollution impacts, is likely to lead to responses by those most directly and personally affected. In the other two examples, the loss of biodiversity is often remote in space (in exotic, far-away locales), and the most serious damages from climate change are remote in time (far in the future), from those who are protesting today.

Local responses to immediate crises of toxicity or other obvious local impacts are an important part of environmental politics, but are far from telling the whole story. Another important part of the environmental movement consists of successful mobilization around issues that are entirely outside the personal experience of the activists. A subtle theory of political motivation and action will be required to comprehend the breadth of modern environmentalism.

4. Two Utopias, or One? The big difference between Marxism and political ecology, for Lipietz, lies

in their ultimate objectives, since ecology cannot endorse the goal of expanding production and incomes. Despite all the similarities, are these two schools of thought advocating two incompatible utopias? Or are the hopeful advocates of sustainable development and red-green alliances correct in their belief that they can be reconciled? Is the Marxist image of increasing mastery over nature necessarily at odds with the ecological vision of harmony with nature, or can we have just enough of each to get by? To aid the search for a final answer, I offer three comments, concerning wealth, poverty, and ecological limits.

First, it is a misstatement of the objectives of Marxism to suggest that expanded production and income is always desirable. The vision of an ideal communist society is one in which all are freed from material necessity; this is a picture of sufficiency, not of endless acquisition. A substantial and growing fraction of the population of the U.S. and other developed countries already have more than enough material goods. They are lacking, to varying degrees, in such social goals as economic security, unalienated work, public services, a clean environment, and meaningful participation in community and political life. In fact, the pursuit of ever greater personal consumption is in part an imperfect substitute for the satisfaction of these social needs. The Marxist vision involves adequate income and private consumption for all — and it involves better ways of satisfying social needs, in an unalienated, empowering, democratic economy and society. To cite one ecologically important example, it is inconceivable that the per capita resources spent on transportation in a rational society could approach current North American levels.

Second, there are vast numbers of people in developing countries — and significant minorities in even the richest countries — for whom more income and consumption would be needed under any social arrangements. A certain level of mastery over nature is, in fact, exactly what is needed by the poor. This is true not only of basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare, but also of a somewhat higher level of material consumption, a fact which poses a potential environmental dilemma. After all, affluence uses materials and creates waste; in contrast, the poor generate very little waste per capita. The historian Susan Strasser has chronicled the use, reuse, and recycling of material goods in 19th and early 20th century American households. Since money incomes were low and material prices were high, everything was painstakingly repaired, mended, and reused.<sup>2</sup> The result was both ecologically beneficial and personally exhausting.

The freedom to take commodities for granted, to spend less household labor on conserving and reusing materials, is much of what makes a person feel affluent. >From 1830 to 1960 the labor time required for the average urban American worker to buy common material goods fell by a factor of 10 or more, and the exhausting 19th-century reverence for materials died out.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, it is necessary to deal with the ecological constraints on a future society. There is a fixed scale of material and energy use, beyond which the global economy cannot sustainably expand. What standard of living could be provided for all on an equitable and sustainable basis? The answer to this question will ultimately determine the compatibility of the Marxist and ecological future visions. Remarkably, this is in part a researchable, empirical question, about which much more could be learned. The level at which the world population stabilizes plays a major role; current demographic projections give grounds for cautious optimism, as birth rates have dropped sharply in almost all regions. Maximizing the productivity of renewable resources and minimizing use of nonrenewable resources will be important, with abundant opportunities for the further development of green technology.

The bottom line is, what will an equitable, sustainable world feel like? It is neither possible nor desirable for the whole world to live like Americans in the 1990s. Might it be possible for eight to

---

<sup>2</sup>Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: Disposal, Recycling, and American Consumer Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999).

<sup>3</sup>

tx864015840 Frank Ackerman, *Why Do We Recycle? Markets, Values, and Public Policy* (Washington: Island Press, 1997), Chapter 10 (a graph of labor time required to buy common materials appears on p. 181).

10 billion people to live as Western Europeans lived in the 1970s? Or will a lower level of consumption, with more of the exhausting 19th-century reverence for materials, be required? Our hopes and our political theories take us only so far, to the (essential) starting point of commitment to building an equitable and sustainable world. Beyond that starting point lies a crucial, unanswered economic and environmental question: how comfortable will sustainability be?

# Nature, Labor and Gender: Marx, Lipietz and Political Ecology

By Alan Rudy

I greatly appreciated the insights to be found in “Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism.” There has been an interesting usage of the term “political ecology” in France. Bruno Latour has addressed political ecology as a modern practice and now Alain Lipietz explores political ecology in terms of Marxism.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, however, it is not clear exactly what the term stands for, beyond perhaps the politics of environmentalism.

In eco-Marxist parlance, particularly in the discourses of development studies and environmental geography, political ecology has a more specific meaning, one often connected to global and “regional” forms of study, namely, a spatial approach Lipietz notes at one point in his essay. These political ecologists, like many contributors to *CNS*, see somewhat greater hope for eco-Marxist thought than does Lipietz. As is true of most political ecologists, I couldn’t agree more with the general position Lipietz suggests: that political ecology represents the future of Marxism. However, I cannot agree that “the general structure, the intellectual scaffolding, along with the key solutions it suggests, must be jettisoned.” This need not however preclude embracing the next moment in Lipietz’s analysis: “virtually every area of Marxist thought must be thoroughly reexamined in order to be of use.”

Similarly, there can be no disagreement with Lipietz’s claim that:

We simply do not know how to conceptualize and still less how to handle the connection between a critique of the existing order, on the one hand, and, on the other, a political practice — truly humane, *a fortiori* ecological — aimed at abolishing this order of things. We do not know how to wed materialism, ethics, and politics. We did not know how to do this as Marxists; as ecologists, we still don’t know.

Where I fundamentally disagree with Lipietz pertains to his views on “the centrality not only of production, but of production *as conceived by Marx*” and the way it “allows one to identify, in one single sweep, the enemy (*capitalism*), the revolutionary agent (*the proletariat*) and *communism*, the political goal.” This claim is made as if Marxists had not long struggled with the issues of productive vs. unproductive labor; skilled trades vs. urban industrial vs. rural agricultural vs. professional-managerial labor processes, class locations, and power relations; national vs. international class interests; anarchism vs. socialism vs. populism vs. peasantism (and which brand of each to take most seriously); production vs. reproduction; science vs. art; and questions of primary identities rooted in class vs. race vs. gender vs. culture vs. religion. Why is there no socialism in the U.S.? Will race, gender, sexuality and ecology be dealt with only after the class struggle is won?

Perhaps much of our difference lies in the context of our training. I was raised an environmentalist and became a socialist later as part of an auto-critique. Similarly, the kind of enemy, agent and goal identification Lipietz suggests may apply to folks historically deemed “economistic” or “vulgar Marxists.” However, in my not-so-long intellectual lifetime, these folks have been on the retreat. We might more effectively analyze contemporary eco-Marxism (which Lipietz does re: O’Connor, see below) than its historically partial and problematical social-or liberal-democratic unionist forebears.

---

<sup>1</sup>Bruno Latour, “To Modernize or Ecologize? That is the Question,” in B. Braun and N. Castree, eds., *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

Over the last two decades of Anglophone literature, scholarship by socialists as different as Robert Young, Neil Smith, James O'Connor, Donna Haraway and Paul Burkett has found in Marx a much richer conception of nature, production and politics than the one Lipietz interrogates. As Burkett points out in his recent book,<sup>2</sup> many critiques of Marx on nature are critiques of his work in *Capital*, and *Capital* vol. I alone. That text, however, developed a theory of capitalism not a theory of socialist ecology (missed by Burkett in his defense of Marx) using the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* vols. II and III. In the early passages of *Capital*, the abstraction “production in general” was explicitly developed so as to contain no historical or material specifics. As such, it spoke to conditions everywhere and nowhere, at all times but never anytime, in particular. Critiquing it, as Lipietz (and others) have done, as inapplicable to contemporary conditions, is to abuse the abstraction, not to address the abstraction’s abuse of reality. Further, the abstraction “socially necessary labor time” operates only at the systemic, global level, and is been repeatedly shown during the history of Marxism to vary from place to place depending on a wide variety of specific political, cultural, historical and environmental conditions.

Along these lines, throughout the text, Lipietz writes as if socialists desire “the advance of the productive forces” along industrial capitalist lines. He appears to assume that “advance” works only along technological lines abstracted from cooperative relations of (re)production. There are certainly many vagaries and problems with the historically “red” view of production and consumption, but given the 30 or more years of research on the alienation inherent in industrial commodity consumption, as well as in production, I’m not at all sure the attribution of “the advance of the productive forces” to technophilic and productivist politics can be accurately ascribed to contemporary (or even recent) Marxism. Now, that position might be attributable to liberal and social democratic industrial unionists but those folks are herds of horses of different colors.

At least in the case of the Anglophone countries, the equation of unionism with socialism and Marxism strikes me as problematic, the socialist protestations and claims of Labor Parties notwithstanding. Lipietz’s concluding section, in particular, conflates liberal and social democratic unionism with revolutionary Marxism. As above, Marxists, even before the Kautsky-Lenin debates, have long worried about and debated strategies for coalition-building and for advancing reformism. To suggest that Marxists have conflated their strategies for coalition-building and incremental reform with revolution is also unfair. Bracketing for now growing rates of individual debt and increasingly fictitious money markets, the mind workers (the salariat) have always depended on the production of commodities by body workers (proletarians). To see it otherwise is to veil the dependence of the North on the South, and of capital and management on labor in both the North and the South.

The issue of class relations becomes, I think, a regular problem in Lipietz’s essay. He asserts that the salariat confronts capital now more than the working class does. This gets the stratification of global and Northern class relations right, but completely veils issues in the South. Certainly the meanings of work are different across income strata, labor processes and spatial locations. However, that the salariat in the U.S. works an average of more than 50 hours a week, on 40-hour contracts, suggests an insight long part of cultural Marxism and bourgeois ideology critique, the relational disunity between meaning and exploitation.

Lipietz’s understanding of Marx’s position on production, enemies, agents and goals is only useful if capitalism is a global, unified totality; if the proletariat is a unified, undifferentiated whole; and if communism is to be the same everywhere. Clearly none of these conditions hold, as was made clear during the modes of production debate of the 1970s and 1980s.

This leads us to Lipietz’s embrace of Ted Benton’s critique of Marx’s architectural metaphor of production in general. Their agreement follows from the ways both men equate what Marx wrote

---

<sup>2</sup>Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

with what Marxist movements have advocated. Socialist feminist standpoint epistemologies, such as that of Donna Haraway, and political ecological perspectives on the uneven development of the production of nature and space, such as those of Neil Smith, emerge in conversation with and explorations of Marx's texts and his dialectical method. This undermines Lipietz and Benton's argument that Marx's increasing "artificialization" of the world frees "humanity from the external constraints imposed by...nature...[and tends]to underestimate the irreducible character of these external constraints."

All (re)production is "situated," the cooperatively negotiated outcome of social ecological relationships. There is no contradiction between this statement and Marx's position — criticized by Lipietz — that "Nature is the inorganic body of man." There is, equally, no necessity that the inorganic body of man NOT be the (in)organic body of "the bee or the royal eagle" as Lipietz claims. Without suggesting that "we" can be anything other than anthropocentric, Lipietz, Benton, and others betray the undialectical character of their own issues with anthropocentrism in their critiques of Marx. Further, despite my support for critiques of the political ecological and anthropocentric shortcomings of Marx's theory of production in general,<sup>3</sup> I find that many critics assume a perfect equation of Marx's stated understanding of his theory and other places it might take us, particularly given our lives within spatio-temporal and material-environmental conditions quite different from those of Marx.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, for this section, while I agree with Lipietz, that there has been a "rupture between Marxism and ethics, between Marxism and democratic politics, between Marxism and ecology," I cannot agree that this derives from Marx having emphasized "the positive aspects of man's transformative capacities." The horror of 19th-century urban life, the stultification of rural existence, and the devastation of land, air and water recounted in the work of Marx and Engels are too clear. When I find that enclosure and squalid urbanization — the alienation of people from nature and community — are the stated prerequisites for capitalist production and the physical, social and spiritual immiseration of the working class, it is hard for me to see Marx unambiguously endorsing either "the advance of the productive forces" or "the positive aspects of man's transformative capacities."

In addition to his critique of Marxist views on nature and labor, there are two other correctives Lipietz regularly advances, those related to women's/feminist movements and those related to greens/environmentalism. Lipietz is correct in that "women's struggle was not aimed primarily against capitalism" and that environmental crises, "while strongly overdetermined by capitalist relations are not reducible to them." However, the various contemporary forms of sexism and the myriad expressions of environmental crisis — just as with the many expressions of racism — cannot be understood absent their relation to capitalism, colonialism and neo-imperialism. It is almost as if the last 30 years of literature on socialist (eco)feminism and eco-Marxist environmentalism did not exist for Lipietz. Further, there is no recognition that the class-blind reformist, individualist, and populist character of so much feminism and environmentalism derives from a fixation on Weberian income/status/consumption approaches to class rather than on the particularly capitalist forms of sexism and ecological destruction. I am not suggesting that sexism, racism, anthropocentrism and homophobia are not historically discrete from capitalism; I am suggesting that they have particular forms under capitalism that are distinct, though, as Lipietz suggests, not reducible to it.

I think the sense of the traditional opposition between reds and greens over "the relationship between nature and mankind" lies, as O'Connor has pointed out, in the failure of each tradition to explore "cooperation" — the dialectics of evolution, production and science — as an abstraction

---

<sup>3</sup>A more insightful ecological commentary on Marx than this one by Lipietz, "I am very much afraid that, for Marx himself, Mother-Nature was taken into account only to be subordinated to the productivist rule of Father-Work," I have perhaps never read.

<sup>4</sup>This is my primary critique of Burkett's *Marx and Nature* in a forthcoming review in *Environmental Ethics*.

which is always both a force and relation of production.<sup>5</sup> This has led to many analyses that miss the cooperative character of social labor and its mediations of the forces-relations dualism. Such an analysis can be found in the last section of Lipietz's article on political progressivism. While O'Connor has not published much of his work on cooperation, there are enough hints in his writings to suggest that these materials are the bridge between the focus on fiscal and accumulation crises in the 1970s and environmental crises in the 1990s.

In his critical commentary on O'Connor's second contradiction thesis, I find two points where Lipietz and I fail to see eye-to-eye. Both are related to my dissertation work which sought to use the second contradiction theory as a heuristic means of organizing political economic, ecological, labor process, and communal data for a regional study of California's Imperial Valley. The first point reflects back on the prior position I took with respect to the idea that capitalism, proletarians and anti-capitalist movements are formally the same everywhere despite their local situatedness in a globally capitalist mode of production.<sup>6</sup>

The second point derives from the issue of levels of analysis. Lipietz is exactly right to seek, "[u]nder the general rubric of radical democracy, [to] embrace the various autonomous social movements, along with their specific contradictions, even while recuperating on a 'regional' basis the insights and spirit of the Marxian approach." This, however, means operating at realms "below" those of the level of abstraction at which both Marx and O'Connor work in their theoretical texts. There is absolutely no direct, local politics that derives linearly from theories of capitalism and/or its environmental contradictions in general. That Marxists have thought such linearity is possible, undergirds the separation of Marxism from ethics, democratic politics and ecology far more than does Marx's emphasis on the dialectics of production.

I have a feeling that the following use of the term "region" doesn't necessarily match Lipietz's meaning. My research, however, focuses on exactly the issue of political ecological regional production. Perhaps the greatest failing of Marxism, political ecological and otherwise, is in addressing the dialectics of spatio-temporality. Not only, as geographers frequently note, are spatial descriptors, like "rural" or "regional," usually deproblematized, but the abstraction of epochs and temporal processes is rarely as transparent as is assumed. I believe Lipietz is seeking a means of mediating the "general," capitalism, and its Marxist critique with the "particular," here seen as the new social movements of environmentalism and feminism. I think we agree that neither "side" is sufficient in and of itself. Where we differ, it seems, is in our reading of the richness of the Marxist tradition.

For example, having read *Capital*, *Monopoly Capital*, *Legitimation Crisis*, and *Fiscal Crisis of the State*, I fundamentally disagree with Lipietz about regulation undermining the usefulness of the concept of "socially necessary labor time." It is "socially necessary," not "politically necessary," labor time that is in Marx's work, though this hasn't always been recognized by Marxists. Secondly, and again following the above-cited texts, I disagree with Lipietz's strong statement that Marxism cannot explain his understanding of commodity prices, in the sense of expressing the degree to which society cares for its social and environmental well-being these days. This is another way of saying that the political ecology and political economy of capitalism have been partly de-reified, that prices are understood as less "natural" and transhistorical, and as more socially transparent. This, for me, is what Marxists say results from crisis and struggle.

Penultimately, the assertion that "the intrusion of the social, the environmental, the political, indeed of the ethical, into the heart of economic relationships" should not necessarily be seen as destabilizing capitalism. The "stability" of Keynesianism-Fordism utterly obfuscates the centrality of the Depression, the military-industrial complex, neo-imperialist adventurism, Third

---

<sup>5</sup>Here, my decade of work with *CNS* and O'Connor has been deeply influenced by an extensive critical engagement with Murray Bookchin's anarchist and eco-libertarian work which grounds social ecological relations in cooperation and mutualism.

<sup>6</sup>Here I am referring back to the finally unresolved exchanges within the modes of production debate of the 1970s and 1980s.

Worldresource extraction, nation-specific forms of class-dividing racial andgendered oppression, and the Cold War to that stability. Similarly, the policies of, and resistance to, theWTO and the staggering proliferation of nationalism andvariations-on-a-theme-by-genocide since 1989 suggest that stability may notexactly be here any time soon.

Finally, on this issue of stability, Lipietz's last paragraphutterly misses O'Connor's central assertion that the first and second contradiction tendencies can,and appear to, counteract one another. This is not a hopeful thought,however, since what it means is that profitability and the destruction ofecological, personal and communal conditions may successfully displace large political ecological crises byintensifying ones of more local geographic scope. Somehow this strikes meas unsustainable and fundamentally unstable, and yet whollycapitalist.



## Marxism and Ecology: A Comment on Lipietz

By Paul Burkett

Alain Lipietz's essay deals with the historical and methodological relations between Marxism and ecological politics. On the historical level, he blames Marx's world-view for the ecological and political failures of Soviet-style communism. In identifying Marxism with Stalinism, however, Lipietz ignores the entire history of Stalinism's submergence of Marxism's rich ecological legacy in theory and practice. As recently shown by John Bellamy Foster, this legacy begins with Marx and Engels but extends through the entire history of Marxism up until Stalin's counter-revolution in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Lipietz also ignores the role of the USSR's isolation and external attack by the West in promoting the adoption of capitalist technologies and the goal of "production for production's sake," the result being widespread ecocide in the USSR itself.<sup>2</sup>

Lipietz seems uncertain about the actual historical role of Marxism. We are told that any discussion of Marxism's future must clearly distinguish between "Marxology" as a purely intellectual undertaking and "Marxism as an application, by a group of like-minded individuals, of a way of thinking." The evident thought/action dichotomy here does not jibe with Lipietz's political-ecological condemnation of entire "political regimes and social movements inspired by the thought of Karl Marx." This unresolved dualism has the effect of fogging over the possibility that different groups of "like-minded individuals" may disagree on what Marxism is (or concoct new versions of it), partly due to their differing class positions in, and political perspectives on, the real world to which it is being applied. In short, the political and ecological content of Marxism can itself become an object of class struggle. This is especially important seeing as how Lipietz's call to jettison "the intellectual scaffolding of the Marxist paradigm" is based on an essentially Stalinist interpretation of this paradigm's content.

Lipietz's attempt to relegate "Marxology" to some purely intellectual realm is thus quite understandable. It helps legitimize his adoption of the by now standard ecological criticisms of Marx, all of which interpret Marx through Stalinist blinkers. Any serious engagement with the "Marxological" literature on the ecological significance of Marx would make Lipietz's entire intellectual and political project a matter of open confrontation rather than bald assertions — of comradely debate rather than the dismissal of those who disagree, to an imaginary and politically irrelevant realm of pure ideas.

Although one would not know it from Lipietz's discourse, the anti-ecological, "productivist" reading of Marx has been strongly contested in recent years.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this new ecological

<sup>1</sup>John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology*, 105, 2, September, 1999.

<sup>2</sup>Natalia Mirovitskaya and Marvin S. Sorros, "Socialism and the Tragedy of the Commons: Reflections on Environmental Practice in the Soviet Union and Russia," *Journal of Environment and Development*, 4, 1, Winter, 1995; John Bellamy Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), pp. 96-101; James O'Connor, *Natural Causes* (New York: Guilford, 1998), pp. 256-265.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Elmar Altvater, "The Foundations of Life (Nature) and the Maintenance of Life (Work)," *International Journal of Political Economy*, 20, 1, Spring 1990; "Ecological and Economic Modalities of Time and Space," in Martin O'Connor, ed., *Is Capitalism Sustainable?* (New York: Guilford, 1994), pp. 76-90; John Bellamy Foster, "Marx and the Environment," *Monthly Review*, 47, 3, July/August, 1995; "The Crisis of the Earth: Marx's Theory of Ecological Sustainability as a Nature-Imposed Necessity of Human Production," *Organization and Environment*, 10, 3, September, 1997; "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift," *op.cit.*; John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, "Liebig, Marx and the Depletion of Soil Fertility: Relevance for Today's Agriculture," *Monthly Review*, 50, 3, July/August, 1998; Walter Sheasby, "Inverted World: Karl Marx on Estrangement of Nature and Society," *CNS*, 8, 4, December, 1997; "Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx: The Real and the Myth in Green Theory," *Organization and Environment*, 12, 1, March, 1999; Paul Burkett, "On Some Common Misconceptions about Nature and Marx's Critique of Political Economy," *CNS*, 7, 3,

engagement with Marx is not purely intellectual, even though it is partly motivated by the need to recover Marxism from the Stalinist abuses and misinterpretations it has been subjected to by both reds and greens (both modern and post-modern) alike. It is true that any attempt to construct a Marxist ecology must include a serious and thoroughgoing reconsideration of “the intellectual scaffolding of the Marxist paradigm” as represented by the work of Marx and of subsequent Marxists. In particular, it must begin with a detailed, painstaking analysis of the various categories of Marx’s critique of political economy from an ecological point of view — an “intellectual” project quite different from the opportunistic quote-mongering and cheap linguistic gamesmanship practiced by many of Marx’s ecological critics. But the project’s more fundamental purpose is to help construct a methodological foundation for a real Marxist ecology capable of informing (and being informed by) an ecological and working-class politics. This purpose is reinforced by the obvious theoretical weakness of non-Marxist green movements. Although Lipietz notes this weakness, he unfortunately goes on to reinforce it by, among other things, repeating the cliché that Marxism must be supplemented with a heavy dose of “Polanyian” thinking to become ecologically correct. This assertion ignores the obvious roots of Polanyi’s valuable discussion of the limits to the capitalist marketization of human existence in Marx’s analysis of the working-day in Volume I of *Capital* — an analysis which, in treating human labor power as a common pool resource threatened by capital and its “market forces,” draws numerous parallels between capital’s respective vitiations of human and extra-human life-forces.<sup>4</sup>

At this point, it would perhaps be sufficient to refer readers searching for a more balanced perspective on the Marxism-ecology question to the previously footnoted publications, and leave it at that. But rather than emulating Lipietz’s strategy of non-engagement, I want to mention two specific issues on which his discussion is quite outdated and questionable even on purely logical grounds.

First, there is the assertion that Marx’s focus on the central role of the relations and forces of production, in both history in general and capitalism in particular, is *prima facie* ecologically incorrect. This partly involves Lipietz’s incorrect conflation of Marx with Stalinism’s one-sidedly “positive” view of the historical development of productive forces: As if Marx did not analyze the alienation of workers and communities vis-à-vis the socially developed productive forces of labor and nature;<sup>5</sup> and as if Marx did not analyze and condemn capital’s conversion of these productive forces into destructive forces “sapping the original sources of all wealth, the soil and the labourer.”<sup>6</sup> But the more fundamental problem is that Lipietz provides no logical argument as to why a methodology emphasizing the relations and forces of human production must by definition downgrade the role of natural production conditions and environmental problems.<sup>7</sup>

---

September, 1996; “Value, Capital and Nature,” *Science and Society*, 60, 3, Fall, 1996; “Nature in Marx Reconsidered,” *Organization and Environment*, 10, 2, June, 1997; “Marx’s Analysis of Capitalist Environmental Crisis,” *Nature, Society, and Thought*, 11, 1, January, 1998; “Nature’s ‘Free Gifts’ and the Ecological Significance of Value,” *Capital and Class*, 68, Summer, 1999; *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (New York: St. Martin’s Press and London: Macmillan, 1999). For a nearly and still valuable precursor of this recent literature, see Howard L. Parsons, *Marx and Engels on Ecology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), especially the Introduction.

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed discussion, see Paul Burkett, “Natural, Social, and Political Limits to Work Time: The Contemporary Relevance of Marx’s Analysis,” in Lonnie Golden and Deborah M. Figart, eds., *Working Time: Trends, Theory and Policy Perspectives on Overwork and Underemployment* (London: Routledge, 2000), in press; also Burkett, *Marx and Nature*, *op. cit.*, Chapter 10.

<sup>5</sup>Sheasby, “Inverted World,” *op. cit.*, and Burkett, “Nature in Marx Reconsidered,” *op. cit.*, pp. 173-176; “Nature’s ‘Free Gifts,’” *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100; *Marx and Nature*, *op. cit.*, Chapters 11-12. Then again, it seems that for Lipietz, this individual and collective alienation of the producers from socially developed productive powers has already been solved by capitalism, at least within the “creative, intellectual” realm of work. His discussion of the “decline of alienation in the labor process” is a profoundly cosmetic treatment of the exploitative world of modern capitalist production.

<sup>6</sup>Marx, *Capital*, Volume I (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 507. For detailed discussions of Marx’s environmental crisis analysis, see Foster, “The Crisis of the Earth,” *op. cit.*, and “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift,” *op. cit.*; also Burkett, “Marx’s Analysis of Capitalist Environmental Crisis,” *op. cit.*, and *Marx and Nature*, *op. cit.*, Chapter 9. For an updated application of Marx’s approach, see Elmar Altvater, *The Future of the Market* (London: Verso, 1993), Chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup>For Marx’s rich analysis of the role of natural conditions in the history of human production and under capitalism in particular, see Burkett, *Marx and Nature*, *op. cit.*, especially Chapters 1-6.

Indeed, the only evidence Lipietz provides for the charge of anti-ecological productivism is a brief reference to Benton's attempted critique of Marx's labor-process analysis.<sup>8</sup> I say "attempted" because Benton ignores Marx's detailed differentiation of the basic categories of the labor-process (especially the instruments and materials of labor) as well as Marx's differentiation between the labor-process and the process of production (the latter which includes ecologically regulated productive processes not entailing direct and immediate contact between production conditions and human labor). Once these differentiations and Marx's other methodological procedures are taken into account, it emerges that Marx's labor-process conception is more ecologically correct than Benton's (as measured, for example, by the ability to incorporate hunting and gathering processes that do not even involve eco-regulatory labor). This helps explain why Marx's detailed analyses of eco-regulated production in Volume II of *Capital* (analyses completely ignored by Benton) go well beyond anything achieved in the recent work of green theorists— especially in terms of the articulation of natural conditions with such basic categories as the turnover of capital. In short, Benton's labor-process critique is not only incapable of supporting the grandiose charges made by Lipietz (e.g., Marx's purported allegiance to "the Biblico-Cartesian ideology of the conquest of nature... taken to its extreme," as exemplified by Stalin's Russia). It is just logically and factually incorrect.<sup>9</sup>

In this connection, it is important to note that a perspective on ecology centered on human production and development need not treat nature merely as a source of material use values to be plundered for human-developmental purposes. Even Benton recognizes that an "anthropocentric" view of nature need not be a purely "instrumental" one, that is, that "some of the human needs in relation to nature which are recognized by human welfare ecologists turn out to be very difficult to fit into the 'instrumental' relationship to nature which ecocentrics take as a defining characteristic of anthropocentrism."<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Benton's development of this point is hampered by his apparent conflation of "useful" and "instrumental." This prevents him from recognizing that Marx's conception of use value (hence Marx's whole conception of human development in and through natural and social conditions) fully encompasses non-instrumental "uses" of nature for human beings such as purely aesthetic use values as well as what contemporary environmental economists call "existence values" not requiring direct human contact with particular natural conditions. Non-instrumental anthropocentrism is hardly Benton's original discovery.

The second major issue raised by Lipietz's critique of "productivism" is that, as noted by Benton, any ecological analysis of human development must assign a central role to "social production as a distinctively human characteristic," and to the corollary that "elements and relations in the non-human world are constituted as so many conditions and materials for human activity only on the basis of historically variable patterns of social relationships, technological means, and socially produced knowledges and cultural forms."<sup>11</sup> In other words, some kind of productivist approach is required not only to grasp the causes of ecological crisis, but also to envision and struggle for an alternative system in which human development is more concordant with its natural conditions. We may not like capitalism's particular class form of productivism, but we need to know its laws of motion and the struggles it generates in order to

---

<sup>8</sup>Ted Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits: An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction," *New Left Review*, 178, November/December, 1989.

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed response to Benton's influential treatment of Marx, see my two-part article: "A Critique of Neo-Malthusian Marxism: Society, Nature, and Population," *Historical Materialism*, 2, Summer, 1998 and "Labor, Eco-Regulation, and Value: A Response to Benton's Ecological Critique of Marx," *Historical Materialism*, 3, Winter, 1998. The basic response to Benton's labor-process critique is also presented in my *Marx and Nature*, op. cit., pp. 38-47.

<sup>10</sup>Ted Benton, "Engels and the Politics of Nature," in Christopher J. Arthur, ed., *Engels Today: A Centenary Appreciation* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 78.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 92. It follows that "ecological 'limits,' whether deriving from shortage of raw materials, demographic change or pollution, cannot be validly specified independently of analysis of the particular forms of human social relations to their non-human conditions, means and media," *ibid.*

envision a new kind of productivism in which human development resonates sustainably with its natural and social environment.

In Marx's class-based approach to this problem, capitalism's exploitative and alienating development of the relations and forces of production paradoxically creates the potential for less restricted, more humanly fulfilling relations between human beings and their natural and social conditions.<sup>12</sup> Far from being imminently anti-ecological, Marx's conception of less restricted human development involves richer, more universal and variegated people-nature relations—relations clearly not reducible to a further quantitative development of the environmentally unsound production and consumption technologies bequeathed by capitalism. But the realization of this potential requires a qualitative transformation of production, science, and consumption, both materially and socially. This requires, in turn, a long struggle by the producers and their communities for a new kind of social union with the natural conditions of production. In short, Marx's revolutionary vision is in no way reducible to Lipietz's narrowly industrialist interpretation of Marxian class struggle. Surely now is the time to move beyond such well-worn, Cold War induced clichés about the ecological incorrectness of Marxism.

---

<sup>12</sup>For a fuller development of the points summarized in this paragraph, see Burkett, *Marx and Nature, op.cit.*, Chapters 11-14.

# On Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism: A Comment on Alain Lipietz

By Walter Contreras Sheasby

How can Marxism contribute to political ecology? The answer depends on the practical political context. From the perspective of Alain Lipietz, who occupies a dual niche as both noted Marxist scholar of the French Regulation group and the third-ranking parliamentary leader of *les Verts*, the migration of *zoon politikon* seems quite apparent: the “reds” have landed among the “greens.” However, from my own view, one unfortunately confined by Yankee exceptionalism, such species scarcely impact one another, much less impact the unyielding space of the bosses’ political domain.

James O’Connor has pointed out the apparent contradiction of traditional laborism and ecology: “[M]ost of the traditional left, as well as the unions, remain focused on enhanced productivity, growth, and international competitiveness, that is on jobs and wages.” It appears that any attempt to integrate “labor (and socialism) and ecology is doomed from the start. Yet, left green politics of different types has made an appearance in all of the major countries of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Lipietz, on the other hand, seems to recognize only those Marxists in the political ecology movement who have broken their links with labor (“left third movements”) and he implies that a union of the first two requires a renunciation of the latter. In the U.S. at least, it seems very clear that the only Marxism which is truly open to an alliance with political ecology is uniquely the barely-visible undercurrent of independent working-class socialism.

In the States, with our history of loyalty oaths and blacklists, we find it hard to appreciate the ironic description of Marxism as “labor’s precious theoretical heritage.” And with very few exceptions, the thin ranks of both green activists and socialist activists would be equally appalled at the idea that “political ecology represents the future of Marxism.” If political ecology is to reinstate a corrigibility in Marxian methodology, so it can, as Lipietz says, “transform reality, on the basis of theoretical analysis, through militancy and political struggle,” it needs a new pedagogy of the oppressed, and not simply the jargon of “a group of like-minded intellectuals.”

Addressing the *CNS* group in particular, David Pepper has cautioned that, “The red-green project is also in danger of dismissing too easily the existence of a working class, and its potential in social change: replacing it, in its historically important position, by the bourgeois new social movements.”<sup>2</sup>

U.S. Greens are trying to explore that working-class potential. While Lipietz finds many things that Greens and allied Marxists have in common, from my Yankee perspective what I would emphasize is simply the opposition to the two bosses’ parties, with their global capitalist assault on labor and environmental conditions, and the critique of the alienation of everyday life.

Kim Moody of *Labor Notes*, which hosts an annual conference of over a thousand independent union activists, has assessed the first of these sentiments: “What is most important about this new movement is that its base springs from the diverse reality of U.S. working-class communities and organizations battered and challenged by economic transformation.” There are a number of political formations involved in this broad initiative that I can’t detail here, but Moody points out that although the campus is not the *foco*, “one of the positive elements of this new movement is the legitimizing of the alliance of Left intellectuals and working-class forces that was so disastrously

---

1 James O’Connor, *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (New York, Guilford Press, 1998), p. 271.

2 David Pepper, *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 247.

shattered in the 1950s.”<sup>3</sup>

Ralph Nader would agree with what Karl Marx told readers of the *Chicago Tribune* on January 5, 1879: “In America the need of an independent Workingmen’s party has been made manifest. They can no longer trust politicians. Rings and cliques have seized upon the Legislature, and politics has been made into a trade. But America is not alone in this, only its people are more decisive than the Europeans.”<sup>4</sup>

A mere 117 years later, on June 7, 1996 the Labor Party held its founding convention in Cleveland, Ohio, and the Greens were there (though not as prominent as socialist sects), as delegates, as press, as activists handing out “Labor for Nader” flyers. The LP banners declared, “The Bosses Have Two Parties: the Workers Need One of Their Own.” Nader spoke as a delegate, from the back of the huge hall: “The Labor Party,” he declared, “is going to end the ability of Democrats to tell progressives they’ve got nowhere else to go!” His remarks scored capitalists who “cross the globe looking for brutal dictators to suppress labor.”<sup>5</sup> “Corporations are the enemy,” he thundered to a standing ovation. “This is the unifying theme here!”<sup>6</sup>

Nader addressed the Labor Party, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 15, 1998, introduced as “The Shop Steward of the American People,” and the word went out that many delegates and even key leaders would unofficially be backing a Labor for Nader effort in 2000 against Al Gore, champion of the World Trade Organization. This “blue-green alliance,” as Nader calls it, would be only the first step in a strategy aimed at splitting the Democratic Party and regrouping its progressive base. Nader’s “structural reform” position would probably make sense to anyone familiar with this country’s exceptional system of unmediated corporate rule: “In the near term there is a need for a modest-sized party that is rooted in progressive communities, agendas and energies, and that (1) focuses on new and stronger tools of democracy for voters, workers, consumers, and taxpayers; (2) breaks through the Dem-Rep taboos against debating the supremacy of global corporations over our political, economic, educational, media and cultural institutions; and (3) brings into progressive politics a young generation of Americans.”<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to recognize the disorganized and dispirited state of the working class today after the marked decline in its strength in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>8</sup> But anyone looking for evidence that the old conflict of “us and them” had been compromised beyond recognition, that the core support of unity “seems ready to crumble into bits,” as Lipietz says, would get an argument at AFL-CIO gatherings as well as the Labor Party. In fact, as Moody points out, the resurgence of labor solidarity in the past decade, in comparison with the Meany/Kirkland era of “business unionism,” is due in large part to the growth of diversity in labor’s ranks as a result of a myriad of economic transformations.

Contrary to Lipietz, this heterogeneity has by no means negated Marx’s insistence that the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself. The contention that Marx imputes a “messianic role” to the working class in its self-emancipation seems rather illogical. It better fits those who imagine a redemption by way of a transcendent heroic figure, and that is an “eschatology” more often witnessed in the socialisms-from-above.<sup>9</sup>

Nader says, “What happens in this kind of society is that...decisions are made and then seven or eight tiers below, the impact is felt. That’s why Marx has had such a terrific impact. He developed an

3 Kim Moody, “A New American Politics: Who Will Answer the Invitation?” *New Left Review*, 216, March/April, 1996, p. 115f.

4 Philip S. Foner, “Two Neglected Interviews with Karl Marx,” *Science and Society*, XXXVI, 1, Spring, 1972, p. 23.

5 Dan Labotz, “Founding the Labour Party: An Historic New Beginning?” *Against the Current*, XI, 3 (n.s.), 63, July-August, 1996, p. 3.

6 David Bacon, “Will the Labor Party Work?” *The Nation*, June, 1996, p. 23; also see Walter Contreras Sheasby, “Ralph Nader and the Greens,” *Against the Current*, XI, 4 (n.s.), 64, September-October, 1996, p. 6f.

7 Walter Contreras Sheasby, “The Nader Campaign: A Challenge to Rethink Our Issues,” *Independent Political Action Bulletin*, 14, Summer-Early Fall, 1996, p. 24.

8 Paul Le Blanc, *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999); Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London: Verso, 1988).

9 Hal Draper, *The Two Souls of Socialism* (London: Bookmarks, 1996).

analysis which clearly focused on the victims, whom he called the oppressed, and the perpetrators, whom he called the ruling class, the capitalists. I've always been convinced that this principal appeal was that he took the first stage of abstract perpetration in the early stage of the industrial revolution and made it personal."<sup>10</sup>

Christopher Phelps, in an essay on "Why Marx Still Matters," takes that insight to a deeper level: "The critique of alienation has an important role to play in a psychology of reconstruction that seeks to recover the emancipatory core of Marxism and revive international socialism. Stalinism and social democracy, in addition to other profound failures, never addressed themselves to the transformation of everyday work life imagined by Marx. If the abolition of alienation in labor were consistently upheld by socialists as a revolutionary aim, it would require them to commit themselves to a profoundly democratic program for the labor process, the primary sphere of human activity."<sup>11</sup> Instead Lipietz celebrates the "great news" of the "decline of alienation in the labor process" through new technology that promotes "creative, intellectual dimensions," apparently for a "majority of workers," who are "now dedicated to the manipulation of signs," and "who are now the ecological movement's principal support."

*O brave new world that hath such people in it!* Without sharing the Luddism of those who regard computers as simply the latest drug-delivery system, few here regard the wired yuppie salariat as any vanguard. The red/green theorists that I know consider William Morris' vision, as impractical as it may seem in the 21st century, closer to ecological socialism than any *After Ford* technological utopia. Many, though not all, would also support Morris' emphasis on what "the change" required.<sup>12</sup>

Lipietz believes that "the distinction between 'reform' and 'revolution' has become blurred," as if the "Marxist theorists of social change — Marx himself, Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lenin," had not ever conceived these terms within a dialectic method, and not as distinct processes. Who is doing the blurring here?

Green activists share with Labor Party organizers the rejection of the formulaic reformism of the Democratic Party for the last 50 years by Stalinism and Social Democracy, and are drawn from an unorthodox Left outside the tradition of piece-meal "progress."

Joel Kovel speaks for virtually every Green when he says, "I consider the Soviet Union to have been a colossal failure and a wrong turn in the history of socialism. This is especially so for the regime of Stalin, which was a period of criminality on a scale scarcely ever seen in human history."<sup>13</sup>

The last ten years have reinforced the analysis by Marxists who opposed Stalinism and Social Democracy and denied that any of their regimes could be designated as "Socialism," if by that is meant the democratic control and social ownership of the major means of production. As Hillel Ticktin, editor of *Critique*, charges:

Conservatives and liberals can have no interest in considering the effects of Stalinism because it would imply that a genuine Marxism could exist and even succeed in understanding and changing society. Since most Marxists are afraid to reassess their own heritage, they prefer to revise their views in favor of the market or liberal thought, if they do not actually become conservatives. The obverse of this thesis is clearly that Marxism, as opposed to Marxists, is in fact untouched.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Charles McCarry, *Citizen Nader* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), p. 139f.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Phelps, "Why Marx Still Matters," *New Politics*, 5, 2 (n.s.), Whole 18, Winter 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Sheasby, "Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx: The Real and the Myth in Green Theory," *Organization and Environment*, 12, 1, March, 1999, p. 25ff.

<sup>13</sup> Joel Kovel, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anti-Communism in the Making of America* (London: Cassell Academic 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Hillel Ticktin, "The End of Stalinism: The Beginning of Marxism," *Against the Current*, VII, 2 (n.s.) 38 (n.s.), May-June, 1992, p. 37.

Unless I misread him, Lipietz seems to endorse an amnesia of this history when he writes, "Once again, we should avoid the all too obvious lessons suggested by the tragic record of really existing communism, and turn instead towards the future." Greens and the broad political ecology movement, however, will have little patience with Marxian theorists who ignore the ecocidal record of the Soviet Union or turn to a crystal ball that only reflects upon the future.

And Marxian theorists have an obligation to dismantle the monumental facade of "socialism" constructed by Stalinism around the "really existing" bureaucratic state capitalism and to similarly knock down the fake Hollywood set of civil "bargaining" and parliamentary "democracy" that hides the decision making process of capitalist domination. If we are able to reinvigorate a living Marxism in so doing, we can simultaneously jettison the crude caricatures perched like gargoyles on the so-called "intellectual scaffolding of the Marxist paradigm."