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# Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism

- Économiste, auteur - Méthodes et concepts -



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The publication of this text in CNS has triggered out a [debate among US ecolomarxist](#). See also [my reply](#).

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## 1. Introduction

At a time when political regimes and social movements inspired by the thought of Karl Marx are vanishing from the earth, does it still make sense to talk about the future of Marxism? I'm not speaking of the future of Marxology. Marx, like Aristotle, is immortal, in the sense that intellectuals will always find new things to learn from or about him. I am talking about Marxism as an application, by a group of likeminded individuals, of a way of thinking, an ensemble of representations, some basic hypotheses; as a compass for finding our bearings in any concrete situation; and as a guide to transformative social action. Today, the only movement that can really claim this sort of agenda to transform reality, on the basis of theoretical analysis, through militancy and political struggle - is political ecology. And so it is that more and more militants and intellectuals, coming out of the (Marxist-inspired) labor movement, are finding one another in the ecological camp.

If many "reds" have landed among the "greens," it's first of all because they had left the red movements, had broken with "socialism," even in its ideally-existing form. It's also because they found in the political ecology movements something of a "family resemblance" with their past experience, a similarity of paradigms. [1] Schematically, the elements they rediscovered there are: materialism, the dialectic historicism, and a "progressive" orientation. I will first discuss this "family resemblance," and then return to the questions that explicit reference to Marx in the ecological movement would pose.

## 2. A Marxist Family Resemblance? [2]

*Materialism.* Political ecology, like the Marxist-inspired workers' movement, is based on a critique - and thus an analysis, a theorized understanding - of the "order of existing things" [3]. More specifically, Marx and the greens focus on a very precise sector of the real world: the humanity-nature relationship and, even more precisely, relations among people that pertain to nature (or what Marxists call the "productive forces"). Of course, their overall evaluation of this relationship of nature and mankind is radically opposed: positive for the Marxists, negative for the greens. A very basic divergence, but one need not exaggerate its importance: for Marx, too, the forces of production are so overdetermined by the relations of production that h critique of the latter really applies to both.

*The dialectic.* The materialism of the greens, like that of Marx, is, in effect, much more a critique of the existing disorder than a celebration of an already available alternative or the promotion of something new. Just as the Marxists relied on a critique of the really existing political economy to ensure its overthrow, the ecologists denounce the really-existing dynamic relationship between humanity and environment to emphasize its unsustainability. For both groups, in fact, the form of historical narrative is the same: it turns on a critique of real structures by real social movements, movements really engendered by the very structures they combat. Their shared thematic bent, their emphasis on the two themes of totality and of interrelations, constitutes an even more basic resemblance between Marxists and greens. The society-nature totality is conceived of as a system, containing relatively autonomous instances and elements, to be sure, but with every element interacting with every other.

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*Historicism.* The greens share with Marxists the conviction that they have arrived at the moment when Minerva's owl takes flight, when a particular order of things brings us so close to catastrophe that a Great Transformation is required: revolution, paradigmatic change, transition to a new era. What the labor movement calls "capitalism," and political ecology, "productivism," is the order that must be overturned. The difference is hardly trivial. But clearly, the "productivism" of the greens occupies exactly the same status as "capitalism" for the reds: an order that must be overturned in order to transform our existence. In either case, it is this order of things that brings the tension in social relationships, and between people and nature, to the breaking point. A "threshold" is then crossed - which explains the emergence of the political ecology movement today, like that of the labor movement at a particular moment in the past.

*Political progressivism.* It has been noted in passing and we will take it up again: ecology is opposed to the labor movement (and to Marxism in particular), on the central point of the "development of the productive forces." However, if they no longer believe in a secular trans-historical movement that guarantees progress, the greens have spontaneously aligned themselves with the various movements for human emancipation, both before and after the rise of the labor movement: democracy, socialism (of the anarchist sort), Third-Worldism, feminism, regionalism. Thus they are aligned with the great historic struggles of the Left, even denouncing parties that claim to be socialist for abandoning their social goals (such as reducing the work day, ensuring the right of foreign residents to vote, and so on).

Schematically: because they are opposed to productivism, the greens are necessarily progressive politically. Thus they support the dominated against the powers that be. The Greens support workers (wage earners or peasants) who resist the reduction of their labor to a mere means of exchange for entering the consumer society. Similarly, they side with the Third World against the imperialist plunder of indigenous peoples, their cultures, and the earth. Just as the Left held up socialism against capitalism, the greens, in opposition to the social and international relations of productivism, hold up the prospect of a "new model of development," "sustainable development," or "ecodevelopment."

Overall, then, political ecology displays many strong similarities with Marxism. These are two "models of hope," [4] of similar design: progressive, materialist (starting from a critical knowledge of the real) dialectical (assuming that this reality will engender its own material critique); and historical ("now is the time!"). In this respect, the green opt for most of the same risks as the Left, and already show signs of the same defects: the "fundamentalism" of the German or French greens just like "ultra-leftism" has often been denounced; all too soon, no doubt, their "realism" (like old-time "opportunism") will also be deplored.

Nevertheless, the greens have one great advantage over the reds they come later. The Green paradigm takes off from its own distinctive base, but this includes a theoretical and practical critique of the paradigm of the Left. It is a principle of hope developing in a mold that is similar - but not the same. It is the principle of hope recast.

We have already pointed to the most well known difference between the two frameworks: the idea that an "advance of the productive forces" drives other forms of progress is totally absent from the green paradigm. As with the Althusserian or Maoist versions of Marxism, political ecology rejects the primacy of the productive forces: it subordinates them to social relations and to the world views that shape such relations. It evaluates relationships between humanity and nature in terms of respect (for human beings, for future generations, even for other species), not by the yardstick of control.

The second difference is more profound. The green paradigm, while certainly politically progressive, it is not "progressivist." Its vision of history is not a tale of progress. In fact, it is far from a linear historical vision. If history did have an inner dynamic, it would, if anything, be governed by the second law of thermodynamics: a history of an inexorable rise of entropy, a history of decay. Only a reflexively critical human consciousness can slow or reverse this decline. Political ecology thus defines progress only as a tendency - defined in terms of certain ethical or aesthetic values (solidarity, independence, responsibility, democracy, harmony). There is no real guarantee that the world will actually move in this direction (as through the "socialization of the productive forces"). The historical and dialectical materialism of the greens is non-teleological, then, even rather pessimistic.

This abandonment of the primacy of the productive forces has another consequence: the *abandonment of the primacy of the producers themselves*. If the greens, political progressives, are often on the side of the exploited and oppressed, it is because their values, the ecology of their ideal world, are opposed to exploitation and oppression. They would never imagine that the producers - simply by virtue of being exploited under productivism - would thereby become bearers of a consciousness of a new world, in which productivism had been overcome.

For the greens, all this means that a determining moment in the historical process (for the Left, the "taking of power") disappears. When asked the question, "Are you reformist or revolutionary?" the greens, even the "fundamentalists," do not know what to say. For they simply cannot identify "the" point at which an "ecological political revolution" would come into play. They are for changing many things, but power, "the" power of the state, hardly counts for them. As heirs more to Michel Foucault and Felix Guattari than to Marxism - even the Marxism of Henri Lefebvre or the early Althusser (of *For Marx*) - the greens undoubtedly dream instead of a series of "microruptures," of a sort of molecular revolution that never really ends.

### 3. Marxism: Expand or Revise?

The similar paradigms and shared ideas of political ecology and the labor movement, noted earlier, point to the question of the future relationship between political ecology and Marxism (labor's precious theoretical heritage). This is particularly the case since political ecology has failed (so far, at least) to produce a progressive, materialist, dialectical, historicist thinker of Marx's stature.

That political ecology represents the future of Marxism is something I will not argue here. Many are already convinced. To the others, I would simply say: that just as communism was Marx's answer to the limits of the French Revolution, so does political ecology seem destined to be the answer to the tragedy of communism today. Just as Marx's theory was a response to the key problem of the 19th century, so does the elaboration of an ecological theory and program seem fated to be humanity's answer to the great problem of the 21st century. To paraphrase the Marx of *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* and the polemic against Feuerbach, it is not enough to put the dialectic back on its feet; it is necessary to bring it back to earth. Or, again: the Marxists have only changed the world in various ways; what matters now is to avoid any more mistakes.

It is the Marxists already won over to an ecological *démarche* with whom I want to talk to here. The question I would raise is this: how can Marxism contribute to political ecology? Which of its aspects must be reexamined or rejected in order to be of use? I raise this issue in good faith. I am convinced, as I just said, that Marx and Marxism can contribute immensely to political ecology, by virtue of the progressive, materialist, dialectical, and historicist character of their ideas. I even think that the Marxist theorists of social change - Marx, himself, Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lenin, or Mao Zedong, with all their errors and disagreements - are a precious heritage for political ecology (I have the problem of the conquest of hegemony especially in mind). But I must be blunt: 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.

### 4. The Fundamental Disagreement

The basic problem is not so much the shortcomings of Marx's conception of the political (quite apart from the false debate between "revolution" and "reform"). Much has been written on this problem, no doubt largely responsible for the criminal thrust of so much of 20th century Marxism. But the identical weakness can be found in the political ecology of today. 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.

But what I want to target more specifically is Marx's way of linking materialism and politics - the *production paradigm*. Let us return to the famous letter to Weydemeyer (March 5, 1852) which spells out the definition by Marx of Marxism and its overall logic:

What I have contributed that is new is:

- (1) to demonstrate that the *existence of classes* rests solely on *particular historical phases of the development of production*;
- (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*;
- (3) that this dictatorship itself represents nothing more than a transition towards *the abolition of all classes and towards a classless society*.

Of course, no one would any longer dare insist that: Marx actually "demonstrated" all that. Besides, a Marxist can simply confine himself to the first, purely scientific and non-eschatological stage of Marx's research program: the analysis of the contradictions of each mode of production. Where the problem lies is in the program itself, its unifying theme: the centrality not only of *production*, but of production as *conceived by Marx*, that is, the process of the transformation of nature, by producers organized in more or less alienating social relationships. This conception is absolutely central, since it effectively allows one to identify, in a single sweep, the enemy (*capitalism*), the revolutionary agent (the *proletariat*), and *communism*, the political goal.

Now, it is precisely this tendency to reduce the natural history of humanity to the transformative activities of men that brings Marxism to loggerheads with human ecology (theoretical, ethical, or political). Ted Benton [5] has provided a remarkable demonstration of how this contradiction flows from the narrowness of the Marxist conception of the productive process itself ("*that of a carpenter*," says Benton, though he might have said, more precisely and as Marx suggests, "*that of the architect*," as opposed to that of the bee). As Benton shows, Marx sees history as a progressive "artificialization" of the world, freeing humanity from the external constraints imposed by his inadequate mastery of nature. This leads him - and the Marxists in his wake - to tend to underestimate the irreducible character of these external constraints (ecological constraints, to be exact). In this respect, Marx shares entirely the Biblico-Cartesian ideology of the conquest of nature, as would be taken to its extreme, first, by the "conquering bourgeois," and then by the sorcerer's apprentices of Stalinist Siberia and the Khazakstan steppes.

I would go further still. It is actually Marx's most alluring ecological passages - those that "eco-Marxists" love to cite, in which he situates human activity in its natural context - that make me uneasiest today. I am thinking in particular of a famous passage from the 1844 *Manuscripts*: "Nature is the inorganic body of man?" But no. Nature is not the inorganic body of man alone, but just as well that of the bee or the royal eagle. Paraphrasing Hugues de Saint-Victor, I would even say that "(h)e who loves mankind is only a tender neophyte; better again is he who loves the other living species as his own. Only perfect is he who recognizes in his own body the inorganic body of nature" (earthworms, for a start).

The ambiguity of Marx's ecologism (which he shares with all the ecological scholars of his time, starting with Vernadsky) appears almost unconsciously in another "eco-Marxist" formula: "Work is but the father of wealth; nature is the mother." In face of the Lassallist tendency which dominated the *Gotha Program* (and since then, the labor movement as a whole), it was creditable, indeed, to acknowledge the existence of nature, just as Freud was right to recall, in the face of patriarchal ideology and the Napoleonic Code, that the mother had a certain role in the physical and psychic production of humankind. Unfortunately, we know only all too well what was concealed behind the Freudian recognition of the mother: "Hail to the Father," wrote Freud in his Poem to Fliess, "who, when all was said and done, knew how to channel the power of the female sex so that it would bring its share of obedience to the law, no longer a mere secret glimmer, as with the Mother." 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, in line with a tradition which goes back at least to Aristotle: "*Matter aspires to form as does the female to the male.*"

Understand me well. I am not arguing here for a radical version of deep ecology. As Blaise Pascal, well before the great Chief Seattle, reminded us: humankind is only a small link in the immense web of nature, but it is the only one that, through thought, understands nature; it is the only species on Earth to be responsible for the earth, and to be able to transform it, for better or worse. To take up the famous chorus of Sophocle's *Antigone*, it is the greatest natural force on! earth, but one which can choose between good and bad. What I mean is that the a priori emphasis of Marx on the positive aspects of man's transformative capacities, and the limitation of his critique of the existing order to human relations in production (without going on to a critique of the content of this production), opened the way to the rupture between Marxism and ethics, between Marxism and democratic politics, between Marxism and ecology.

### 5. The Reformist Strategy

To reform Marxism on such a central point, while at the same time preserving its achievements, is not so easy. As always in paradigmatic revolutions, two ways are open to us. The first is one of cautious change, pruning the dead or rotten branches, relaxing overly strong hypotheses, enriching an unchanged central core with secondary revisions. The second involves a radical substitution! of paradigm: reconstructing materialism around a new intellectual frame,

using parts recycled from the ruins of the old Marxist paradigm.

I would suggest straightaway that only the second option will ultimately prove satisfactory, although I have yet to find a persuasive overall design. Thus I will concentrate on a critique of the first alternative, reviewing several problems that must be resolved in order to move beyond the Marxist triad of "anti-capitalism, proletarian revolution, communism."

When they finally acknowledged reality, post-1968 Marxist groups generally took the reformist path. It seemed sufficient to recognize various "secondary fronts" outside capitalist production, and to incorporate the respective social movements to the proletarian struggle against capital and for communism. In order to retain the Marxist paradigm, it was necessary to show:

That these social movements in fact took issue with capital (at times one had to make do with observing that they were confronting the capitalist state, something that almost any social movement might do);  
that these movements were especially concerned with the plight of the working class, and that it was therefore those at the intersection of the labor and social movements, with affiliations to both, who would be most qualified to take over the movement's leadership;  
that this proletarian leadership would assure the convergence of the particular movement with the workers' movement, and thus with the historic interests of humanity as a whole. Communism could be counted on to abolish the "secondary contradiction" that was the movement's particular concern.

Thus, very early on, the peasant movement, and then the Third World decolonization movements, were grafted onto the workers' struggle. In the 1970s, it was the feminist movement that would defend its autonomy in the face of recognition - as belated as it was intrusive - by the proletarian camp. Today, it is ecology's turn.

The most rigorous formulation in this direction, without doubt, is James O'Connor's. [6] Alongside the "first contradiction" (between capital and labor), he introduces a "second contradiction" - between capital and the general conditions of capitalist production. These conditions include all that is required for the reproduction of capitalism but that capitalism cannot produce itself: the workforce, the social infrastructure, the environment (natural or transformed). This highly synthetic formulation has the great merit of providing a unified framework for both theoretical analysis and the actual politics of social movements. Since the list of "external conditions" resembles Carl Polanyi's in *The Great Transformation*, O'Connor baptizes this enlarged Marxian paradigm as "Polanyian-Marxist." And it certainly does spring from the same common Marxian tree, now endowed with new branches: eco-socialist, class-feminist, and so on.

O'Connor deduces two major economic consequences from his formulation - a realization crisis, and a tendency of the rate of profit to decline. Without launching into a critique of these contradictions here, I would only suggest that his notion of the sort of crisis they would entail seems a bit hasty. It jumps over an important point: the existence of a variety of capitalist development models, models that can alternatively contain or exacerbate either of the contradictions he describes.

I would rather emphasize a more basic criticism O'Connor's paradigmatic reform does, of course, provide a fairly solid ground for pursuing a new set of fruitful questions for research. However, it runs up against insurmountable problems, as has been seen in the case of similar experiments in the past. Radical feminists, for instance, were quick to point out that:

1. The women's struggle was not aimed primarily against capitalism, but against specific relations of oppression - relations that were in any case anterior to capitalism (patriarchy, "sexism," and other such notions).
  2. Women cannot place any special reliance on the (male) working class, with which they are often actually at odds.
  3. The Marxian blueprint of communism - in which the freely associated producers figure as "hunters in the morning, fishermen in the afternoon, and literary critics at night" - oddly leaves to one side the question of cleaning and ironing.
- In sum, this enlarged Marxian paradigm - even while it highlights, quite correctly, the benefits that capital derives from its "external conditions" - turns out to be a Procrustean bed for the aspirations of other social movements.

Thus, in the absence of a totally transformed and all-inclusive paradigm, I would tentatively propose that we adopt the other alternative that O'Connor suggests: a "Marxist-Polanyian" framework. 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. This approach, too, is not self-evident. I will try to work it out at three levels of the old unitary Marxian paradigm, indicating, along the way, some ecological issues that Marxism strikes me as quite capable of handling, even if there are no solutions as of yet.

## 6. Economic Analysis of Contemporary Ecological Crises

In its broadest sense, political ecology centers on those contradictions between the individual and the collectivity that pertain to the environment (which is at once the condition and the product of all our activities). A traffic jam on a vacation route is an excellent example of a local crisis of an ecological kind: each individual's environment is at once the width of the highway, the totality of other drivers, and the pollution that results. This is not a contradiction between capitalist production and its environment; even while strongly overdetermined by capitalist relations, it is not reducible to them.

There is a spectrum of possible regulations that might resolve such a mini-crisis, ranging from establishing toll stations, increasing the price of gasoline, widening the highway, or building a railway line, on the one hand, to reducing the workday and resolving the "work time/leisure time" contradiction, on the other. All such measures would draw, in part, on the classic modes of regulation - democracy, the market, and the law - that answer to "horizontal" contradictions, contradictions between the individual and the community, rather than the rulers and the ruled.

Let's consider the most economic aspect: the theory of value. Marxist theory provides a good point of departure. But as ecological struggles begin to oblige individuals to consider the external costs of their behavior, prices will be driven further and further away from the relations of value, that is, from the "socially necessary labor time." This discrepancy can be dealt with from Marx's perspective, but on condition that his theory of the value form - "the language that commodities speak" - is taken seriously. The first step Marx takes is "the transformation of values into prices" (which is far from posing the insoluble problems that some, in the 1970s, claimed to have found). [Z] One can expand the transformation formula by taking account of rent, socio-taxes, ecotaxes, and so on.

But then one very quickly realizes that what the commodity is telling us is no longer so much the quantity of labor it contains, but rather the ecotaxes which it may or may not reflect, the social protection which the producers may or may not enjoy, and so on. In short, what a commodity expresses today - and what, I hope, it will increasingly tell us tomorrow - is the degree of concern the society has for its members' well-being, and the wisdom it displays in the management of humanity's common heritage. We are heading, in effect, towards a notion of "sustainable value." How might such an index govern, in turn, the conditions under which production occurs? The market, surely, would not suffice, unless pressured by the law - backed by the sense of responsibility of the consumer?producer?citizens. Would this intrusion of the social, the environmental, the political, indeed of the ethical, into the heart of economic relationships open the way to a greater or lesser degree of stability for capitalism? Recalling the long period of Keynesian-Fordist stability, I suggest we not rush to judgement on this point.

## 7. The "Proletarian Revolution" (or, at least, the central role of wage labor in social change)

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It would be easy at this point to wax ironic about the collapse of proletarian hopes, recalling, with Polanyi, that men and Women engage in struggle not only as producers but "as consumers, citizens, strollers, or lovers." But let's concentrate on what Marx said (and, said well, and is therefore still of use): resistance to the exploitation of labor is the fundamental threat that weighs on capitalist relations of production. But even if we grant that this struggle is only one of several bands within the rainbow of emancipatory movements, we are still obliged to acknowledge the diffraction of the "red" band itself. The, mythical aura of the "proletariat," the Marxian agent of social transformation, has been fractured in at least three ways.

Contrary to Marx's prediction (which held true until the crisis period of Fordism), the "real subordination of labor to capital," the "expropriation of the knowledge of the worker," and the "reduction of all labor to simple labor" are all beating a retreat in the:1most globally competitive societies of today. In Japan, Western Europe, and Scandinavia, productivity is increasingly based on a combination of the routine, manual aspects of work and its more creative, intellectual dimensions. This is great news, but it also suggests that the concept of "alienation" needs to be thought through again.

The decline of alienation in the labor process, as Andre Gorz [8], has observed, raises the question of the "meaning" of production itself. It is not clear that going beyond the wage relationship would resolve the problem, for the segment of the labor force involved. The bourgeois apologetic seizes on this in order to highlight the "cognitive," "cooperative" aspects of the enterprise, forgetting the competition and exploitation that are its other dimensions. The problem is that it's not simply a question of ideology, but a reality of the "lived world" for the more skilled components of the labor force. This leaves traditional trade unionism in crisis, at the same time raising such difficult questions as, "Should we participate in quality circles? In return for what?" And so on.

Contrary to all of Marx's analyses, the "intellectual powers of the labor process" no longer "confront" the majority of workers. This majority, itself now dedicated to the "manipulation of signs," remains more or less subject to capitalist domination - but outside the process of transformation. So what is now the meaning of "the term 'worker,' comrades"? What confronts capital now is the salariat, not the working class. If this salariat is no longer involved in production, its characteristics (as assumed in the framework of historical materialism) disappear or must be reinvented. Do we need to replace the production paradigm with one centered on communication, as Habermas suggests? We can try, but this would only be a partial solution: hundreds of, millions of workers throughout the world will remain subject to capital in the most classic ways. Nonetheless, it is a fact that the "manipulators of signs" are now the ecological movement's principal support.

Also contrary to Marx's analyses, capital no longer needs all the proletariat at its disposal (that is, all those who, deprived of means of production, cannot produce for the market on their own). The idea that all proletarians were destined to become wage earners, a "reserve army of labor," is only justified in a regime of mainly extensive accumulation. When accumulation becomes primarily intensive, and without a substantial redistribution of productivity gains, there is no reason for the momentum of capitalist production to be governed by labor supply. The Fordist path of indefinite growth of mass consumption is also ruled out, by the constraint! globalization as much as by the rising organic composition of capital or ecological constraints. The current restructurings of the labor force, finally, leave an ever greater fraction of the proletariat structurally redundant, however low its wage. Thus, alongside the wage earner (but not necessarily at his side), appears the figure of the excluded or marginalized.

This "Lewisian" situation, long familiar in the Third World, is now spreading to the advanced capitalist countries. In this context, the Keynesian argument - "the fight for better wages is also a fight for jobs" - no longer holds. "Salaried" and "excluded" can no longer naturally consider themselves a unified bloc against "them," the capitalists. It is a three-way game, at least, and deals between capital and skilled labor, at the expense of the marginalized, are all too easy to imagine. Thus the sharpness of the debates over "work sharing" (an issue that ecologists have brought up), which implies struggles and compromises, not only between "us and them," but even within what was hitherto called the "proletariat." For Marx, the messianic role of the working class was predicated on the fact that it had "no particular interest to defend," and had "only its chains to lose and world to gain. Today, the world that the excluded hope to gain is that of the salariat (which has its salaries to lose); by the very fact of their exclusion, they have lost any of the leverage against capital they might have had.

To conclude our discussion on this point: not only is the proletariat - the "directing force," according to Marx, of the abolition of the existing order of things - no longer the sole nor even the principal force in this regard, but it has been rent asunder. The old "worker-employee-proletarian" identity is gone, replaced instead by a pronounced diversity of situations, interests, and aspirations. Marxism is accustomed to this sort of problem - "the construction of popular unity." But now this applies even to what it used to consider its core support, a following that seems ready to crumble into bits. It does not follow that "ecology, unlike socialism, will be unable to find a social base." It does mean, however, that, like the democracy that underlay the French Revolution, it will have to construct a pluralist base, not directly tied to the immediate or even "historic" interests of one or another group.

### 8. The Communist Horizon

Even if one rejects the Marxian eschatology, the idea that resistance to oppression is the reverse image of the goal to



be attained remains a basic tenet of all critical, dialectical, and historical materialism. And all the more so since the distinction between "reform" and "revolution" has become blurred. The actual content of the ideal is no longer postponed to "afterwards," but is increasingly realized, in the form of "radical reformism," in the struggles of today. Yet it is difficult to mobilize, struggle, or die for the principle of "sustainability." So why is it that ecology, no less than public opinion in general, is so reluctant to recuperate the rallying cry of "communism"? 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.

Communism: when Marx sought to define its content, he more or less sketched out the opposite of the prevailing alienation: "abundance? abolition of all classes? work as the most basic need? end of our subjection to the division of labor?" and, to round off, the formula "to each according to his needs, from each according to his capacities." A rich formula, indeed, but one that Marxists, if they want to be of use to political ecology, must urgently rework.

The first problem stems from the peculiar definition which ascribes a totally individualistic content to a term evoking the community. "Communism" meant for Marx, of course, common ownership of the means of production, a condition which he thought could ensure individual freedom and responsibility. Yet today, after a century of setbacks for every possible variant of collective property, common ownership" is a joke! Well before any "theories of agency", Charles Bettelheim showed that property relations did not resolve certain essential problems, such as those of power relations between individuals in the workplace, or between production units themselves. [9] Similarly, the individualistic definition of communism continues to bring up questions about such matters as the social construction of individual "capacities," and the collective definition of legitimate needs." We should examine these two aspects of the definition more closely.

"To each according to his needs:" a formula that had the merit of welding everyday trade union struggles to the labor movement's final goal. By demanding higher wages one was already struggling for communism! But now here is ecology, to tell us that labor in the developed countries already receives, on average, more for its "needs" than the planetary ecosystem can sustain - at least if one grants that Bangladeshis have the same "needs" as workers in North America! The values of political ecology (solidarity, conviviality, responsibility) can no longer tolerate an unreflective definition of "needs" - and this brings it into collision with traditional trade union ideology.

On the other hand, one could argue that precapitalist peasants and indigenous peoples have preserved a conception of needs that is radically "other" - and "sustainable." In this case, one is led to posit an ideal future world in which very different models of "ethno-development" would be combined. But this would still leave us with the problem of the free circulation of individuals (including young persons and women) from one model to another, thus raising the issue of regulation once again.

"From each according to his capacities" is just as ambiguous. It made good sense as a critique aimed against rentiers. In that case, however, the phrase becomes utterly incongruous when the dominant strata, as today, are yuppies or businessmen, accused not of idleness but of monopolizing the now scarce resource of work.

More charitably, one could argue that what Marx meant to say was that unlimited demand (governed by the principle "to each according to his needs") would be matched by unlimited supply, because the noble and creative activity of work would now figure as "the first vital need." This idea is central to utopian socialism: human beings will always want to express themselves in productive activity. It is confirmed by the work of a socio-analyst like Gerard Mendel; it is expressed in the principle of "autonomy" that ecologists have proposed.

The problem is that this aspiration to express oneself in one's "capacity to act," and to "see the results of one's own activity," does not in any way lead into a movement for the collective organization of production. A much more likely trend is towards the sort of generalized artisanal dream of the early Proudhonian anarcho-syndicalists. Basically, human beings hope that society will provide what they need to live in dignity, in exchange for the possibility of freely expressing their abilities (which might receive social recognition, as well). One could imagine such an outcome in the context of a remodeled salariat, but also in a framework of independent self-employment, informed by communitarian ideas.

The question is even more complicated when one recalls that the greater part of human work, carried out by women, is still situated within patriarchal relationships. These relations, which combine the bonds of love and oppression in a particularly perverse way, have been battered by the feminist advance. They still respond, however, even today, to our most fundamental needs. And these needs, even in a society completely free from patriarchy, will not have disappeared.

Ten years from now, there will be 150,000 hundred-year-olds in France. It is not their eighty-year-old daughters who

will care for them - nor their sixty-year-old granddaughters, just taking up their well-deserved retirement after a lifetime of feminist struggle. Which "capacities" will one appeal to then? Neither celebrating "localized employment" ("les emplois de proximité") nor denigrating "casual jobs" ("les petits boulots") will move the discussion forward. Rather, we need to develop a "third sector of social and ecological utility," within the framework of the welfare-community (1a Communauté-Providence). The construction of an eco-feminist communism remains an unfinished task.

This very rapid and partial overview - of Marxism's problems in the face of new social movements, particularly ecology - may seem like a systematic attack. That is not at all my intention. To repeat, I believe that the Marxist heritage provides us with superlative instruments for navigating certain problems - problems that will be with us in any case. It would be a shame if, to resolve them, we renounce the concepts and methods developed by one of the greatest geniuses among these frail "thinking reeds" that we are.

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[1] I am using the word "paradigm" here in Kuhn's sense: a theoretical framework susceptible to development and variation, like a tree with branches diverging from a common trunk.

[2]

Here, I am summarizing very briefly a prior contribution, "Capitalisme et mouvement ouvrier. Similitudes et différences," *Politis, La Revue*, 1, 1992.

[3] We should recall that Marx "calls Communism the actual movement that abolishes the state of existing things."

[4] That is to say, two realizations of Ernst Bloch's "principle of hope," which is itself the ultimate core of Marxism. See my article, "Les crises du marxisme: de la théorie sociale au principe d'espérance," in Bidet et Texier, eds., *Fin du communisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).

[5] "Marxisme et limites naturelles: critique et reconstruction écologiques," *New Left Review*, 178, 1989; translated in *Actuel Marx*, 12, 1993.

[6] See J. O'Connor, "The Second Contradiction of Capitalism," in J. O'Connor, *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998).

[7] See my book *Le Monde enchanté* (Paris: Maspéro/La Découverte, 1982).

[8] *Métamorphose du travail, quête du sens* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).

[9] *Calcul économique et formes de propriétés* (Paris: Maspéro).