

# PROGRESS SANS SUSTAINABILITY ?

## - A GREEN CRITIQUE OF ORTHODOX MARXISM

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is specifically focussed on a central theoretical anchor of Marxism, namely the philosophy Dialectical Materialism. An attempt is made to show that Marx's depiction of historical progress and human emancipation achieved through the operation of Dialectical Materialism, is not ecologically sustainable. Hence we argue for the need to reorient Marxist philosophy beyond its absolute preoccupation with anthropocentrism and materialism, towards greater sensitivity for nature, the non human world and the forthcoming generations.

### KEYWORDS

Marxism, Dialectical Materialism, anthropocentrism, sustainability

### INTRODUCTION

There is widespread consensus today that the two most fundamental challenges facing the world are eliminating the social economic injustice and inequity on the one hand and saving the planet and its climate from further degradation and destruction, on the other.

Geologists have termed ours as the age of the 'Anthropocene', in which, for the first time, fundamental processes of the Earth and its atmosphere have been changed, for the worse, by human exploitation of fossil fuels. According to the scientists, the ecological crisis that we are facing today, has already touched its peak. We are on the verge of a deadly apocalypse anytime now. Climate Change has manifested in unprecedented events- cataclysmic floods, high speed hurricanes, off the chart heat waves, rapid retreat of the glaciers, advancing or delaying of seasons, intensified winters, and much more.

On the flipside, according to the World Bank : The work to end extreme poverty is far from over, and a number of challenges remain. Access to good schools, healthcare, electricity, safe water and other critical services remains elusive for many people, often determined by

socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and geography. Moreover, for those who have been able to move out of poverty, progress is often temporary: economic shocks, food insecurity and climate change threaten to rob them of their hard-won gains and force them back into poverty. It will be critical to find ways to tackle these issues as we make progress toward 2030.

Both of these issues bear equal significance and are interconnected so that none can be addressed in isolation. This underlines the indispensability of both the Socialist movement as well as the Ecological movement.

Now, since the 1970s, provocative critiques of Marxist thought by mainstream environmentalists, biocentrists, survivalists, and other factions of the ecological spectrum have demanded reconsiderations of Marx and his theory of the relationship between humans and their environment.

This paper is specifically focussed on a central theoretical anchor of Marxism, namely the philosophy Dialectical Materialism. An attempt is made to show that Marx's depiction of historical progress and human emancipation achieved through the operation of Dialectical Materialism, is not ecologically sustainable. Hence we argue for the need to reorient Marxist philosophy beyond its absolute preoccupation with anthropocentrism and materialism, towards greater sensitivity for nature, the non human world and the forthcoming generations.

## **BRIEF IDEA OF MARXIAN DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM**

Karl Marx's philosophy of historical progress is based on the concept of dialectical materialism. In line with the philosophical paradigm presented by GWF Hegel, Marx observed that the economic mode of production is the chief foundation of every society and it tends to evolve and improve incessantly, to finally attain a perfect state beyond which there may be refinement but no evolution.

In his scheme of things, contradictions inherent to the mode of material production interact to cause this progress. Precisely, the antagonism develops between the progressively advancing forces of production (that includes labour and machinery) and the relations of production (that is determined by the nature of ownership of the means of social production), respectively. This, according to Marx is the most basic and fundamental contradiction of human civilisation and the history of human kind is basically a progressive series of developments that are inevitably leading towards the perfect state of Communism where this contradiction is resolved forever.

Dialectics operate as do the laws of the natural world. Dialectical progress is essentially evolutionary in nature and always works through the intensification of contradictions. In fact, one fundamental rule governing the operation of dialectics is the indispensable necessity of the contradiction to reach its zenith before it can effect a substantial transformation of the status

quo. For Marx, therefore, the maturing of contradictions is a positive sign of progress towards a better and improved state of material existence.

## THE ANOMALY

Notwithstanding the economic contradiction referred to by Marx, upon a deeper analysis, one finds another equally, if not more significant contradiction in society- that between the human tendency to assume mastery over nature and pursue endless growth oriented material progress on the one hand and the finitude of earth's ecological carrying capacity, on the other, that is, the planet's :

- i. Supporting capacity or the capacity to regenerate what is being exhausted.
- ii. Assimilative capacity or the capacity to tolerate different stresses and pressures. Pollution is one instance.

In short, it is the contradiction between the mode of production of a given society and the ecological context within whose limits it must operate.

Now the critical question is: **Is the Marxist approach based on dialectical materialism, adequate or applicable to the resolution of the contradictions we have identified?** This leads us to a series of questions that require to be thoroughly researched upon. Based on a very basic understanding of Marxist philosophy and with an eye on the most pressing concerns of our contemporary conditions one set of answers to the questions raised could be thus.

**First, does the development of contradictions always cause evolution towards better and improved state of affairs?**

With regard to the problem we have identified the answer is 'no'. **We find that the contradiction between man's ambitions and nature's limits cannot logically culminate in a state of material development or prosperity that is quantitatively and qualitatively better than the present state of being.** Rather, the intensification of this conflict will result in the destruction of nature beyond repair. This cannot be seen as progress.

**Second, are the contradictions that are internal to the mode of production more fundamental than that between the mode of production and its external conditions, chiefly its ecological context?**

We do not think so. **We suggest that both are equally significant.** While the internal contradiction that is highlighted by the Marxists is concerned with securing intra generational equity or social justice, the external contradiction is concerned with inter generational equity or ecological sustainability. Materialist dialectics emphasises the decisive role of internal contradictions, and hold that although external conditions can facilitate or impede development, they are usually unable to shape the main course of a process or of development as a whole. As such they would show the victory of Soviet Union, for instance, chiefly

through resolution of internal contradictions of Russian society even in the face of adverse external conditions. But looking at the contradiction we have identified, development, solely focussing on the resolution of class antagonism(internal) without due regard to ecological sustainability(external) will only prove suicidal.

**Third, is it feasible to rely on the dialectical mechanism to resolve the fundamental contradiction we have identified? In other words, is this contradiction characteristically similar to the economic contradiction between the classes- haves and have nots and hence similarly amenable to the same dialectical course of resolution ?**

The conflict between the mode of production and ecological sustainability is characteristically different from the economic contradiction of the classes. Accordingly, it is difficult to conceive of a solution to it using the dialectical mechanism **because of at least the following two reasons:**

a. Dialectics involves a long term automatic evolutionary process under which contradictions are allowed to intensify. The chief task of human agency is to catalyse this process and not to hinder or retard it in any manner. But the solution to our problem lies only in placing brakes on anthropocentrism before it gets too late. We cannot afford to let the contradiction deepen because that would cost us an apocalypse. However, the orthodox Marxists might denounce this suggestion as reactionary or conservative! Orthodox Marxists would convince us that we should allow industrialism to progress unhindered because it is possible to have a ‘post-scarcity’ economy under communism by harnessing the renewable natural resources such as wind energy for instance, which would be rendered easy through advanced technology. **But, can we still escape the ‘moral dilemma’ of inter generational equity ?**

b. For Marx, the dialectical solution of the economic contradiction is finally achieved under the perfect stage of Communism characterised by material abundance and perfect egalitarianism. Marx portrayed Communism as a stage where people will be equipped with the best and mightiest technology, man’s power over nature will be raised to tremendous heights, enabling him to control its spontaneous forces to a much greater extent and to employ them in his own interests. Clearly, Communism would embody the worst phase of the contradiction we identified, not its solution even in the remotest manner.

**Hence it appears that we cannot apply dialectics to the resolution of the contradiction we have identified. However this cannot be concluded before adequate research confirms it.**

It is relevant here to throw light on the perspective put forward by a Green thinker named V Plumwood who shares a similar critique of Marxism:

Plumwood argues, ‘Those who work for an environmentally conscious non-capitalist society need to go beyond Marx and draw on a broader range of philosophical, ethical, and socialist traditions (including the ethical traditions of some of the “primitive” societies Marxists tend to see as so backward), for Marx’s views on nature, and associated central parts of this theory, belong to the past, and are far too close to those which lie at the root of many of our troubles.’

According to Plumwood, the foundational problem, lies in Marx's concept of the relationship between humans and nature. Marx's declaration of unity between humans and nature, is no more than a declaration of man creating nature through transformation that destroys what is nonhuman or "the other" and replaces it with a humanized version. Unity and harmony are achieved only because nature no longer has an independent identity, meaning that Marx's concept of nature as man's "inorganic body" has not satisfied a central criterion of dialectical synthesis. Plumwood thus asserts the logical impossibility of presenting Marxist theory in an ecological light.

Plumwood went on to delineate several specific ways in which Marx had gone wrong. First, she pointed out, Marx ousted God from Hegel's system of order and gave humans that role of creation (Carter, 2007) and expression. That put Marxist theory "on a head-on collision course with any attempt to develop a genuine and deep environmental consciousness". As a result, the ecology movement must dedicate itself to rejecting this transposition:

"The development of environmental consciousness is in large part a process of discarding this Enlightenment legacy, of upsetting the human hubris which resulted from it and restoring a sense of the limitation of human powers and human ability to understand, interfere with, and manipulate a larger natural order."

In addition, Plumwood argued, Marx's view of capitalism as a necessary stage in human development collapses once we reject his argument that we must dominate nature to become fully human. Our need to acquire power over nature played a central role in Marx's theory of history, explaining the development of classes and the final abolition of classes through technological progress, but when the principle of nature-transformation has been cast off, so is much of the rest of Marxist theory.

Plumwood also argued that Marx's ill-founded view of animals as inferior to humans must give way to research indicating that many animals have consciousness and are capable of activities that humans cannot reproduce.

Finally, according to Plumwood, Marx's position on energy use and minimization of life-sustaining labor was neither plausible nor appealing in ecological terms, and his acquiescence to centralization and technology cannot be accepted by ecologists working for decentralization and alternative technologies.

Rather than reinterpret Marx or engage in obscure attempts at reconstruction, Plumwood argued, the ecology movement must set aside Marx's homocentric transformation of nature and look for solid ground instead. Her contention gained widespread notice at the time and was cited frequently within the literature surrounding the search for a red/green coalition.

## **A POSSIBLE SOLUTION**

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to arrive at a concrete solution to the anomaly identified, one possible suggestion could be considered. Instead of relying too blindly on the determinist theory of Dialectical Materialism that seems largely inadequate in resolving

the contradiction between the economic mode of production and ecological constraints to it, we need to take concrete steps to make the mode of production ecologically sustainable to the greatest extent possible because we obviously realise the deadly implications of allowing the contradiction to deepen any further. In short, environmental consciousness has to precede material progress. To that extent, we are breaking away from Dialectical Materialism and adopting an approach based on some sort of idealism derived from a proper assessment of the empirical realities of our present context. We need to place far more faith in the potentialities of human reasoning power, sagacity and foresight than the determinist theory of dialectics would allow. Accordingly, the ideal we could strive for is the achievement of an egalitarian world that is progressively working towards attaining perfect harmony with nature.

As for the Greens, they should not undermine the case of intra generational equity because it has clear ecological implications. Resolving the problem of poverty certainly requires the agumentation of material wealth and their just distribution to all segments of the society, which is the chief demand of the broader socialist movement.

We hope that our suggestions contribute towards a substantial reorientation of Marxism and Ecologism to facilitate a meaningful coalition of both philosophies because it is on the success of this coalition that the future of the human civilization largely depends.

## CONCLUSION

This paper made an attempt to show that Orthodox Marxism's central preoccupation with the economic contradiction inherent to the mode of production is not adequately sensitive to its ecological implications. Of particular focus has been the mechanism of Dialectical Materialism that Marxists use to explain the process of social and historical change through deepening of crisis. When applied to the contradiction between the mode of production and the ecology, this method will prove to be disastrous by inviting an apocalypse. The way out could be therefore, incorporation of a substantial ecological sensitivity to Marxist theory which in turn would entail a merger of the Red and Green movement.

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