



Towards a transformative Ecosocialism

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Abstract

Ecosocialism emerges as a transformative critique of capitalism's ecological and social contradictions. Drawing on Marx's theory of metabolic rift (Foster, 2000) and O'Connor's (1998) "second contradiction of capitalism," this paper argues that capitalism's growth imperative exacerbates environmental degradation while deepening inequalities. Ecosocialism synthesizes Marxist political economy with ecological limits, rejecting both market-based environmentalism and traditional socialism's productivism. Case studies—from Schumacher's (1973) critique of industrial gigantism to the 2017 Ecosocialist International—demonstrate its praxis. Challenges remain, including undertheorized Marxist ecological economics (Burkett, 2006) and neoliberal resistance to systemic alternatives. Yet, ecosocialism offers a viable framework for democratizing production and achieving socio-ecological balance.

Keywords: Ecosocialism, Metabolic rift, Marxist ecology, Green theory, Capitalist contradictions

The historical trajectory of socialism has consistently encompassed an ecological dimension. Since antiquity, nature has served as the foundational basis of economic systems. Ecosocialists contend that capitalism represents a perpetually expansionist and productivist regime, which has engendered a profound disruption in the metabolic relationship between human society and the natural world (Foster, B. Clark, and York 2010, 53). Although the ecosocialist movement has recently gained prominence, its foundational arguments can be traced back to the writings of Marx and Engels. Marx himself articulated that "capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier." The capitalist imperative of 'grow or die' dictates relentless market competition and surplus accumulation, driven by profit maximization irrespective of social and ecological costs. The unrestrained accumulation of capital, commodification, and the ruthless exploitation of labor and nature, coupled with market competition, undermine the foundations of a sustainable future, thereby jeopardizing the very survival of the human species (Kovel 1995: 32).

In "Small is Beautiful," E. F. Schumacher critiques the 20th-century obsession with what he terms "gigantism." For several decades, mass production processes have yielded cheaper goods, while mass media and culture have expanded opportunities for broader audiences, creating larger markets and political institutions. However, Schumacher feared this trend led to the dehumanization of individuals and the economic systems

governing their lives. Furthermore, Schumacher posits, "We have indeed been living on capital of living nature for some time but at a fairly modest rate. It is only since the end of World War II that there has been a unique quantitative jump in industrial production. We are recklessly squandering 'natural capital' because we treat it as if it were income. The modern industrial system fails to recognize that it consumes the very basis on which it has been erected and on irreplaceable capital which it treats as income." Such quantification and unrestrained growth, at the expense of understanding qualitative differences, result in unhealthy or destructive development.

Capitalist development precipitates an accumulation crisis due to inherent structural contradictions. Marx theorized the first contradiction in capitalism as the systematic exploitation of labor, a prerequisite for continued accumulation. The increasing surplus-value thus extracted creates barriers to future accumulation, which depends on the sale of goods and services back to producers within a system of unequal wealth distribution, leading to a crisis of overproduction. Consequently, James O'Connor (1998) makes a significant attempt to develop a green-red economic theory. He argues that capitalism suffers not only from an overproduction crisis driven by the exploitation of workers and a rising rate of surplus-value but also from an environmental crisis rooted in the destruction of natural conditions of production by competitive capital accumulation. Environmental crises manifest as rising costs of accessing environmental use values essential to production. The expenses are expected to increase further as workers and communities manage to transfer the costs of environmental protection or cleanup to capitalists. This scenario is what ecosocialists describe as the second contradiction, where capitalism sabotages itself by damaging the ecosystem it relies on, including human society, thereby worsening the conditions necessary for its own continuation. This is believed to lead to a crisis of underproduction. Capitalism should be seen as a global system with structural demands that go beyond space and time. The growth of capitalism can endanger its own future by systematically eroding its foundational elements, including environmental aspects. These are essential for production but cannot be produced as commodities, such as environmental goods and services (O'Connor, 1998). Marx called them "conditions of production," while Polanyi referred to them as "fictitious commodities." O'Connor emphasizes placing ecosocialism within a comprehensive theory of global capitalism's development over the last two centuries. This approach allows him to integrate his varied concerns into a unified political agenda and demonstrate that the expansion and development of capital have historically involved the fundamental transformation of nature on multiple levels, not just outward spatial growth. Marxism reveals that capitalism inherently faces an ecological crisis. Capitalist relations commodify the natural world, reducing its diverse forms to mere resources for appropriation and exploitation. This breach occurs by compressing the world's multidimensional complexity into a singular drive for capital. The intrinsic value of wealth (i.e., unrelated to labor efforts) and use-value (i.e., nature transformed by labor) are replaced with exchange value (where everything is quantified in monetary terms). Capital is based on growth without reciprocating to the environment and is a network of exploitative social relations where the surplus produced by labor is appropriated by the owners/managers of the means of production. Consequently, capitalism leads to resource destruction. Ecosocialism provides ways to understand capitalism and envision a society that transcends

capitalism, where production is driven by human needs rather than human capability. Ecosocialists start with the premise that environmental degradation and economic injustice stem from the same source: a world where profit is the ultimate goal. Ecosocialism presents a radical alternative that combines the exploitation of labor and the environment. It rejects a capitalist notion of "progress" based on market growth and quantitative expansion and advocates for policies based on non-monetary criteria, such as social needs, individual well-being, and ecological balance. Ecosocialism critiques both mainstream "market ecology," which does not challenge the capitalist system, and "productivist socialism," which overlooks natural limits (Michael Löwy). Thus, ecosocialism seeks to harmonize humanity with nature. Given the eco-socialist commitment to Marxist analysis, it is also known as Ecological Marxism. While ecosocialism critiques both green economics and liberal environmentalism (Kovel 2007), the primary focus and starting point of its conceptualization and practice is the criticism of the capitalist mode of production.

Victor Wallis contends that appending 'eco' to socialism is unnecessary since socialism inherently involves making decisions that benefit humanity. It is impossible to advocate for the working class without considering environmental issues. Nonetheless, the 'eco' prefix is used to highlight the essential link between ecology and socialism in critiquing capitalism. Wallis describes this as a natural connection, as both ecologism and socialism oppose the notion that production decisions should be profit-driven (Red Green Revolution).

Kovel shared O'Connor's quest for organizing an international red-green movement. In 2001, Kovel and Lowy authored an article titled "An Ecosocialist Manifesto," which began by rephrasing the pressing question: "Numerous resistance points emerge spontaneously across the chaotic landscape of global capital. Many are inherently ecosocialist in nature. How can these be unified? Can we imagine an 'ecosocialist international?' Can this vision be realized?" In 2017, over a hundred delegates from red and green movements in nineteen countries across five continents convened in Venezuela to establish the First Ecosocialist International. Ecosocialism offers a comprehensive framework that connects various struggles. It is not a uniform framework and thus unites diverse branches of environmental movements, such as green anarchism, including social ecology, primitivism, and green syndicalism. For ecosocialists, the logic of capital is the primary cause of ecological degradation. John Bellamy Foster, in *Marx's Ecology*, argues that Karl Marx himself recognized capitalism's metabolic rift with nature. The metabolic rift refers to Marx's concept of the "irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism" or the idea of ecological crisis tendencies under capitalism. Marx theorized a disruption in the metabolic interaction between humanity and nature caused by capitalism. Capitalism dematerializes the economy and neglects the unavoidable material economy in which we exist (also known as the ecology). In essence, capitalism ignores the natural, ecological metabolism by extracting energy from it and converting it into money. This is achieved by developing disruptive industrial-technological structures, which it justifies as efficient due to their ability to generate surplus capital for the bourgeoisie (Mathew Giddin). As Saito stated in 2018, "Marx began to analyze the contradictions of capitalist production as a global disturbance of natural and social metabolism." Saito also demonstrated that Marx's concern for nature extended beyond the metabolic rift. Marx's concerns are evident from his observations in *Capital*,

which state, “Just as the greatest profits to oil companies occurred as oil approached the limits of what could be produced, the destruction of arable land, water supplies, or breathable air will pave the way for far greater profits in the future. And then the very nature of a capitalist economy is such that it must grow. There is an imperative to reduce labor costs through technology, and then to re-employ such labor, it is necessary for the economy to expand.” It is this that has led to the industrialization of agriculture and the concentration of humanity in larger cities, resulting in an intensification of the “metabolic rift” between the city and the countryside, resulting in the degradation of land” (Capital, 1894).

It has been frequently observed that Marx’s overarching historical framework, particularly his alignment with technological determinism and advocacy for the dictatorship of the proletariat, appears to contradict his nuanced analyses of alienation and commodity fetishism, which lie at the heart of his critique of capitalism. Humanist Marxists, prioritising the latter aspects, have often distanced themselves from orthodox interpretations. Yet in doing so, they have not fully reckoned with the tensions within Marx’s oeuvre, thereby limiting the transformative potential of his theoretical legacy. Eco-Marxists attempt to bridge this divide by integrating the ethical and humanist dimensions of Marx’s early writings with a scientific critique of ecological degradation, aiming to restore a more holistic Marxist tradition.

In recent decades, the expansion of global markets, the rise of transnational corporate power, and the commodification of nearly all aspects of social life have eroded the grounds for optimism within the capitalist system, especially in the economic cores of the global order. The ecological foundations that support the continued existence of the capitalist mode of production are now being systematically undermined. These environmental conditions are not only essential to capitalism itself but also vital to the survival of civilization and biodiversity more broadly. To avert ecological collapse, it is imperative to confront the subjugation of human societies to market logic—a condition Marx diagnosed with remarkable foresight—though the strategies for transcending capitalism may need to diverge sharply from those advocated by earlier Marxist orthodoxy.

Eco-Marxist scholars, however, still face challenges in liberating their analyses from the residues of traditional Marxism. This is evident in conceptual difficulties surrounding the reconciliation of ecological and economic value, particularly the tendency to treat life, liberty, and natural systems as if they were quantifiable in economic terms. The relentless drive for surplus-value, whether expressed as profit, rent, or interest, has reconfigured both people and ecosystems into instruments of capital accumulation. This reductionist approach has become a dominant global logic, demanding ever-increasing sacrifices from human and non-human life alike. Interpreting nature solely through its capacity to yield surplus value distorts our understanding of both social relations and humanity’s connection to the natural world. Moreover, market systems lack the intrinsic mechanisms necessary to detect, regulate, or prevent environmental collapse. As such, capitalism not only fractures ecological stability but also disrupts the equilibrium within the world of labour.

Ecosocialism challenges the capitalist emphasis on endless economic growth and rejects models that prioritize state-driven, growth-oriented development. Instead, it acknowledges the finite nature of Earth’s ecological

systems and advocates for resource preservation to ensure sustainability for future generations. Within a socialist framework, collective ownership of the means of production provides a mechanism for regulating and potentially limiting the overexploitation of natural resources. Ecosocialism thus advances a vision of enduring equilibrium between social systems and the environment. As Albritton argues, ecosocialism has evolved into both a mobilising framework and a critical theoretical approach aimed at confronting capitalism in the contemporary era. Nevertheless, the global inequality generated by capitalism continues to fuel demands for justice, equity, and democratic participation, particularly among marginalised and exploited populations. The interlinked crises of environmental destruction and deepening socio-economic disparity—driven by capitalist systems reliant on high-carbon industrial production and unrestrained consumption—demonstrate that confronting ecological breakdown is inseparable from dismantling capitalist structures.

In response, political elites and corporate interests have promoted limited climate mitigation efforts, often termed "Green Capitalism," including investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and electric vehicles. However, such measures are widely seen by ecosocialists as superficial and insufficient. These reforms do not address the structural roots of ecological and social crises and fall short of delivering the transformative changes needed to establish a truly equitable and sustainable ecosocialist order.

The two-phase analysis of the ecosocialist movement was developed by John Bellamy Foster (2011). Foster contends that "the first-stage ecosocialist analysis," without undertaking a deep-rooted Marxist critique of the existing Green theory, attempts to incorporate green theory into Marxism, and vice versa. Such grafting operations aim to synthesise the red and green theories. Foster criticises these attempts such as the introduction of the concepts of 'conditions of production' and 'the second contradiction of capitalism' by O'Connor (Foster 2001 : 462). In contrast, the "second-stage ecosocialist thinking" goes back to Marx in order to understand the ecological context of his materialism and therefore, critically analysing and even transcending the existing green theory. It involves a long theoretical revolution that takes ecological thought and its challenge seriously, while at the same time engaging in a historically grounded synthesis of materialist dialectics with the natural scientific elements of ecology. This scientific manner of ecosocialist analysis criticises the spiritualistic, idealistic, and moralistic emphases in the green theory¹.

Capitalism, as Marx and Engels describe, depends on socialised cooperative production and capitalistic appropriation. Capitalism depends on growth. Endless growth is built into the capitalistic system, where the logic for every cooperation is "grow or die". This logic is incompatible with steady state, ecologically

¹ The Emergence of Green Theory in the 1960s marks the birth of the 'modern' environmental movement as a widespread and persistent social movement that has publicized the environmental 'side-effects' of the long economic boom following the Second World War. Rapid economic growth, the proliferation of new technologies, and rising population generated Green theory. It belongs to the tradition which believe that environmental issues evoke questions about relations among ourselves and others in the context of community and collective decision-making. Green politics is a political ideology that aims to foster an ecologically sustainable society often rooted in environmentalism, nonviolence, social justice and grassroots democracy. It began taking shape in the western world in the 1970s; since then Green parties have developed and established themselves in many countries around the globe and have achieved some electoral success.

sustainable economy. Externalisation of cost of capitalistic production onto society and nature is a major problem in the capitalistic system. Price system of market does not measure the cost of pollution, ecological destruction. Market does not find in its interest the internalisation of cost not in the. Thus, capitalism socialises the risk and privatises the profit.

Following the early work of Lukács, “nature” was treated by many neo-Marxists as a social category, and it was still accepted that the progress of humanity is based on reducing nature to nothing but an instrument of the economy with the ultimate goal of dominating it completely. Later, Lukács acknowledged that he had not sufficiently acknowledged that humans are part of nature, which has its own dynamics. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1975) nature was still deemed to be Man’s inorganic body made comprehensible through being humanized. There were neo-Marxists who did appreciate not only Marx’s radically different understanding of humanity, but also his later view of nature.

Marxists dispute the analytical power of Marxian economics to explain ecological problems. They are also divided over the exact nature of the relationship of capitalism with nature and its implications for capitalism’s ecological sustainability. Kovel argues that capital’s stewardship of the earth will necessarily bring about the ecological catastrophe – and with it, the breakdown of the capitalist system and the civilization organized about its reproduction (Kovel, 1999). In effect, many Marxists like O’Connor (1998) assert that capitalism is incapable of answering ecological problems. In *Marx and Nature*, Burkett argues that “the value-nature dichotomy cannot be overcome by grafting “green tax” and subsidy programmes onto an economic system propelled by capital. The pursuit of an ‘optimum’ on capital’s terms is the goal of ecoregulation using monetary and market-based means (Burkett, 1999). Furthermore, he appears to imply that ecoregulation is imposed on the capital from the outside, and thus argues, quoting Marx, that whoever “wants to put up barriers to capitalist production, from the outside, through custom, law, etc.” will quickly discover that such “merely external and artificial barriers would necessarily be demolished by capital” (Ibid.).

To illustrate further, one could look at the opposition to the socialist trend associated with the Sunrise Movement and the Green New Deal in the US, which recognises the need for a state-led regulatory framework to ensure “economic and climate security” by promising 20 million Union jobs in the US and 100% transition to green renewable energy, along with affordable housing, public education and universal healthcare to the working class in the US. The GND has faced resistance from the neo-liberals, especially the Republicans, who have defamed it as the “degrowth movement” which advocates for fewer liberties and lesser income and have termed it a “a hippy-dippy socialist plot to seize American hamburgers and ice cream”. The GND seeks to undo the systemic injustices and deeply entrenched conditions that disproportionately affect low-income communities, that capitalist thinking boxed into a dead-end of technocratic managerialism has failed to do. However, systemic changes require a radical restructuring of the economic production from neoliberal ideology to reorganisation on social democratic lines, with social ownership of means of production. Green deals would fail to bring economic or ecological empowerment in a capitalist system due to opposition by

bourgeois elite, who would resist all means of realising ecosocialism. Hence, it is time to move toward an international ecosocialist, democratic community, where working class possesses the right to make decisions with respect to production, such as what to produce, how to produce, and so on, based on the principles of ecological planning. Economic and climate emergency demands a radical transfer of power from the shackles of market competition (which destroys ecological capital) and democratise the decision-making power in the economy according to the principles of Social democracy.

To sum up, the neo-Marxists, re-examining Marx's work, came to appreciate the profundity of Marx's critique of commodity fetishism and how fundamentally people are deluded by it, while eco-Marxists have shown how this delusion extends to our understanding of nature and a particular way of conceptualizing the relations among people and between people and nature. The problem with the Ecosocialist literature is that it is undertheorized in the realm of environmental Marxist economics. The inadequate development of a critical, scientific Marxist praxis on ecosocialist cause has resulted in ecosocialism being rejected as the cry of the romantic idealist and has been associated with the moral or spiritual theorisation under Green Theory. Ecosocialism could provide a greater support to the wider socialist cause in the age of climate risk (as highlighted time and again by the IPCC Reports of the United Nations), which in itself is a product of capitalistic appropriation. A deeper theorisation would result in legitimisation and popularisation of the ecosocialist movement as architectonic and the starting point of all red-green movements.

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