

From Karl Marx to Eco-Marxism

written by Michael Löwy | August 14, 2024



Reflection on Marx's contribution to an ecological perspective has made considerable progress in recent decades. The somewhat caricatured image of a "Promethean" Marx, productivist and indifferent to environmental issues, conveyed by certain ecologists in a hurry to "replace the red paradigm with the green," has lost much of its credibility. The pioneer in the rediscovery of the ecological dimension in Marx and Engels was undoubtedly John Bellamy Foster, with his book *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (Monthly Review Press, 2000), which highlights Marx's analysis of the "metabolic breakdown" (*Riss des Stoffwechsels*) between human societies and the natural environment, brought about by capitalism. Bellamy Foster transformed *Monthly Review*, one of the most important publications of the North American left, into an eco-Marxist journal, and gave rise to a whole school of Marxist thought around the theme of the metabolic rift. The school includes such important authors as Brett Clark, Ian Angus, Paul Burkett, Richard York, and many others. Bellamy Foster can be criticized for his reading of Marx as a committed ecologist, from his early writings to his later works, without taking into account texts or passages that follow a productivist logic; but the importance, novelty, and depth of his writings cannot be questioned. In reading Marx from an ecological perspective, there is a before and an after to Bellamy Foster.

Close to this school of thought—the young Japanese scholar Kohei Saito's first book, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy* (Monthly Review Press, 2017) distinguished himself with a more nuanced interpretation of Marx's writings. In his latest book, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), Saito develops and extends his analysis of Marx's writings, criticizing the productivism of the *Grundrisse* and Marx's famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), writings often regarded as the definitive formulation of historical materialism. In the 1859 Preface, Marx sees the productive forces as the main driving force of history, which, thanks to revolution, would be freed from the "fetters" of capitalist relations of production. Saito shows how, from 1870 onwards, in his writings on Russia and in his ethnographic or naturalist notebooks, Marx moved away from this vision of history. According to Saito, in this "last Marx," a new conception of historical materialism is emerging—albeit unfinished—in which the natural environment and pre-modern (or non-European) communities play an essential role. Saito also attempts to show, notably on the basis of the *Notebooks* recently published by the new Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), Marx's adherence to the idea of degrowth, but this hypothesis does not find an effective foundation in these writings.

It seems to me that the question of Marx's contribution to ecosocialism, or, if you like, to eco-

Marxism, is not limited to his texts on the relationship with nature—which admittedly remain relatively marginal in his work: there is not a single book, or article, or chapter of a book, by Marx or Engels, dedicated to ecology, or to the ecological crisis. This is quite understandable, considering that capitalist destruction of the environment was only in its infancy and was not at all as serious as it is today. I think there are arguments in his writings that are not about nature, but are nevertheless essential contributions to an eco-Marxist reflection, provided they are rethought in the light of the ecological crisis of our time. Two elements need to be taken into account here: (1) Marx's critique of capitalist hubris: unlimited accumulation/expansion; (2) communism as the "Kingdom of Freedom."

1. Capitalism is a system that cannot exist without an unlimited expansive tendency. In the *Grundrisse* Marx observes:

Capital, in so far as it represents the universal form of wealth—money—is the tendency without limits or measure to exceed its own limit. Any limit can only be limited for it. Otherwise, it would cease to be capital: money in so far as it produces itself.[...] It is the perpetual movement that tends always to create more.¹

This is an analysis that will be developed in the first volume of *Capital*. According to Marx, the capitalist is an individual who functions only as "personified capital." As such, the capitalist is necessarily a "fanatical agent of accumulation," who "forces men, without mercy or respite, to produce for the sake of producing." This behavior is "the effect of a social mechanism of which he is only a cog." So what is this "social mechanism" whose psychic expression in the capitalist is "the most sordid avarice and the most petty calculating spirit"? Here is its dynamic, according to Marx:

The development of capitalist production requires a continuous enlargement of the capital placed in an enterprise, and competition imposes the immanent laws of capitalist production as external coercive laws on each individual capitalist. It does not allow him to keep his capital without increasing it, and he cannot continue to increase it unless he accumulates it progressively.²

The unlimited accumulation of capital is therefore the inflexible rule of the capitalist social mechanism: "Accumulate, accumulate! That's the law and the prophets! [...] Accumulate in order to accumulate, produce in order to produce, that is the watchword of political economy, proclaiming the historical mission of the bourgeois period."³

Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake, without rest or mercy, without limits or measure, in a perpetual movement of growth, a continuous enlargement: this, according to Marx, is the implacable logic of capital, the social mechanism of which capitalists are nothing but "fanatical agents." The imperative of accumulation becomes a kind of secular religion, a "fanatical" cult that replaces the "law and prophets" of Judeo-Christianity.

The significance of this diagnosis for the Anthropocene of the twenty-first century is obvious: this productivist logic of capitalism, this hubris that demands permanent expansion and refuses all limits, is responsible for the ecological crisis and the catastrophic process of climate change of our time. Marx's analysis helps us to understand why "green capitalism" is nothing but an illusion: the system cannot exist without accumulation and growth, a growth "without limits or measure," 80 percent of which depends on fossil fuels. This is why, despite the soothing declarations of governments and international climate meetings (the Conference of the Parties) on the "ecological transition," greenhouse gas emissions have not stopped growing. Scientists are sounding the alarm and stressing the urgent need to halt all new exploitation of fossil fuels, pending a rapid reduction in the use of existing sources; yet the major oil monopolies are opening new wells every day, and their

representative, OPEC, is publicly announcing that they will have to exploit these resources for a long time to come, “to satisfy growing demand.” The same applies to new coal mines, which are constantly being opened, from “green” Germany to “socialist” China.

The fact is that demand for energy is only growing, and so is the consumption of fossil fuels, with renewables simply adding to them rather than replacing them. “Green” capitalists who want to do things differently will be squeezed out of the market: for as Marx reminds us, “competition imposes the immanent laws of capitalist production as coercive laws external to each individual capitalist.”

In 2023, the average temperature of the planet became dangerously close to the limit of 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels—a limit beyond which an uncontrollable process of global warming is likely to be triggered, with increasingly intense feedback mechanisms. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change scientists stress the need for immediate emissions reductions, with the years between now and 2030 being the last chance to avoid catastrophe. Yet the European Union and other governments are solemnly announcing that they will be able to achieve “net zero” emissions...by 2050. This announcement is doubly mystifying, not only because it pretends to ignore the urgency of the crisis, but also because “zero net” is far from being identical with zero emissions: thanks to “offset mechanisms,” companies can continue to emit if they “offset” them by protecting a forest in Indonesia.

Modern industrial capitalism has been totally dependent on coal and oil for three centuries and shows no inclination to do without them. To do this, it would have been necessary to break with accumulation “without limits or measure,” and with productivism, by organizing a process of planned degrowth, with the elimination or reduction of entire sectors of the economy: an approach totally contradictory to the very foundations of capitalism. Greta Thunberg rightly points out that it is “mathematically impossible to solve the climate crisis within the framework of the existing economic system.” This impossibility is explained by Marx’s analysis in *Capital* of the inexorable mechanics of capitalist accumulation and expansion.

Many ecologists blame consumption for the environmental crisis. Admittedly, the consumption model of modern capitalism is clearly unsustainable. But the source of the problem lies in the production system. Productivism is the driving force behind consumerism. Marx had already observed this dynamic. In his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), he observed:

Hence production produces consumption: (1) by providing the material of consumption; (2) by determining the mode of consumption; (3) by creating in the consumer a need for the objects which it first presents as products. It therefore produces the object of consumption, the mode of consumption and the urge to consume. Similarly, consumption produces the predisposition of the producer by positing him as a purposive requirement.⁴

This is much truer in our time than it was in the nineteenth century. Capitalist producers create the “impulse to consume” by means of a vast, immense advertising apparatus that hammers home, day and night, on city walls, in newspapers, on radio or television, everywhere, “without truce or mercy,” the imperative need to consume this or that commodity. Commercial advertising takes over every area of life: sport, religion, politics, culture, information. Artificial needs are created, “fashions” manufactured, and the system induces a frenzy of consumption, “without limits or measure,” of products that are less and less useful, which allows production to expand, to extend to infinity. If, as Marx observed, it is production that produces consumption, then it is the productive system that needs to be transformed, rather than preaching abstinence to consumers. The pure and simple abolition of commercial advertising is the first step toward overcoming consumer alienation and enabling individuals to rediscover their true needs.

Another dimension of capitalist consumerism Marx criticized—a dimension with obvious current ecological implications—is the predominance of having over being, of the possession of goods, or money, or capital, over free human activity. This theme is developed in the *1844 Manuscripts*. According to Marx, bourgeois society is dominated exclusively by “the sense of possession, of having.” In place of the life of human beings appears “the life of property” and “in place of all the physical and intellectual senses has appeared the simple alienation of all these senses, the sense of having.” Possession, having, is alienated life: “The less you are, the less you express your own life, the more you have, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged being.”⁵

This is another form of consumerism: the important thing here is not use, but the possession of a good, a commodity. Its most obvious manifestation is the conspicuous consumption of the privileged classes, which Thorstein Veblen studied in his classic, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Today it has reached monumental proportions, fueling a vast industry of luxury goods: private jets, yachts, jewelry, works of art, perfumes. But the obsession with possessions is also spreading to other social classes, leading to the accumulation of goods as an end in themselves, regardless of their use value. Being, human activity as such, is sacrificed to having, the possession of goods, feeding productivism, the flooding of social life with a growing mass of products that are less and less useful. Of course, the resources needed to produce this mountain of commodities are still, and increasingly, coal and oil....

2. Communism as the “Kingdom of Freedom” is founded on the priority of *being* over *having*, by reversing the alienated logic imposed by capitalism. Bourgeois political economy pushes this perverse logic to its ultimate consequences: “Self-denial, the renunciation of life and all human needs is its main thesis. The less you eat, drink, buy books, the less you go to the theatre, the ball, the cabaret, the less you think, love, theorize, the less you sing, talk, fence, etc., the more you save, the more you increase your treasure [...] your capital [...] all that the economist takes from you of life and humanity, he replaces with money and wealth.[...]”⁶

Marx included in what constitutes being—that is, human life and humanity—three constituent elements: (1) The satisfaction of essential needs (drinking, eating); (2) The satisfaction of cultural needs: going to the theater, cabaret, buying books. It should be noted that these two categories involve acts of vital consumption, but not the accumulation of goods (at most books!) and even less the accumulation of money. The inclusion of cultural needs is already an implicit protest against capitalism, which wants to limit the worker’s consumption to what is necessary for basic survival: food and drink. For Marx, the worker, like all human beings, needs to go to the theater and the cabaret, to read books, to educate himself, to amuse himself; (3) Human self-activity: thinking, loving, theorizing, singing, speaking, fencing, and so on. This list is fascinating for its diversity, its serious yet playful nature, and for the fact that it includes both the essentials—thinking, loving, speaking—and the “luxuries”: singing, theorizing, fencing, etc. What all these examples have in common is their active nature: the individual is no longer a consumer, but an actor. Of course, we could add many other examples of human self-activity, individual or collective, artistic or sporting, playful or political, erotic or cultural, but the examples Marx chose open a wide window on the “reign of freedom.” Of course, the distinction between these three moments is not absolute: eating and reading books are also activities. They are three manifestations of life—being—in the face of what lies at the heart of bourgeois society: having, property, and accumulation.

Choosing to be rather than to have is therefore a significant contribution by Marx to a socialist/ecological culture, to an ethic and an anthropology at odds with the fundamental data of modern capitalist civilization, where the absolute predominance of having, in its commodity form, is leading, with increasing frenzy, to the destruction of the planet’s ecological balance.

Important reflections—directly inspired by the *1844 Manuscripts*—on the opposition between being and having can be found in the Freudo-Marxist writings of the philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. A German Jewish anti-fascist who emigrated to the USA, Fromm published his book *Avoir ou être* (To Have or To Be) in 1976. A choice on which man's future depends, which compares two opposing forms of social existence: the having mode and the being mode. In the first, my property constitutes my identity: both subject and object are reified (commodified). You feel yourself to be a commodity, and the "it" owns the "me." Possessive greed is the dominant passion. But, Fromm insists, greed, unlike hunger, has no point of satiation; its satisfaction does not fill the inner void....

So what is the mode of being? Fromm quotes a passage from Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*: "Let us start from the idea that the human being is a human being and that his relation to the world is a human relation. Love, then, can only be exchanged for love, trust only for trust."

The being mode, Fromm explains, is an active mode, wherein human beings express their faculties, their talents, the richness of their gifts; to be active here means "to renew oneself, to develop oneself, to overflow, to love, to transcend the prison of the isolated self; it is to be interested, attentive; it is to give." The mode of being is socialism, not in its social democratic or Soviet (Stalinist) version, reduced to an aspiration for maximum consumption, but according to Marx: human self-activity. In short, concludes Fromm, quoting Marx again in the third volume of *Capital*, socialism is the kingdom of freedom, whose goal is "the development of human power as an end in itself."

Karl Marx rarely wrote about the emancipated society of the future. He took a close interest in utopias, but was wary of versions that were too prescriptive, too restrictive, in short, dogmatic; his objective was, as Miguel Abensour so aptly reminds us, the transcendence of utopia to critical communism. What does this consist of? In the third volume of *Capital*—an unfinished manuscript edited by Friedrich Engels—we find an essential passage, often quoted but rarely analyzed. The word "communism" does not appear, but it does refer to the classless society of the future, which Marx defines, and this is a highly significant choice, as the "Kingdom of Freedom" (*Das Reich der Freiheit*):

In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite.⁷

The context in which this passage appears is interesting. It concerns a discussion on the productivity of labor. The author of *Capital* suggests that increasing productivity not only makes it possible to increase the wealth produced, but above all to reduce working hours. This would seem to take precedence over an unlimited extension of the production of goods.

Marx thus distinguishes two areas of social life: the "reign of necessity" and the "reign of freedom,"

each with its own form of freedom. Let's start by taking a closer look at the first: the reign of necessity, which corresponds to the "sphere of material production" and therefore of labor "determined by need and external ends." Freedom also exists in this sphere, but it is a limited freedom, within the constraints imposed by necessity: it is the democratic, collective control of "socialized" human beings over their material exchanges—their metabolism—with nature. In other words, what Marx is talking about here is democratic planning, in other words, the essential proposition of the socialist economic program: freedom here means emancipation from the blind power of economic forces—the capitalist market, the accumulation of capital, the fetishism of the commodity.

Let's go back to the passage above from the third volume of *Capital*: it's interesting to note that this text doesn't talk about the "domination" of human society over nature, but about the collective control of exchanges with nature: this was to become, a century later, one of the founding principles of ecosocialism. Work remains an activity imposed by necessity, with a view to satisfying the material needs of society; but it will cease to be alienated work, unworthy of human nature.

The second form of freedom, the most radical, the most integral, the one that corresponds to the "Kingdom of Freedom," lies beyond the sphere of material production and necessary work. However, there is an essential dialectical relationship between the two forms of freedom: it is through democratic planning of the economy as a whole that priority can be given to free time; conversely, the maximum extension of free time will enable workers to participate actively in political life and in self-management, not only of companies but of all economic and social activity, at the level of neighborhoods, towns, regions, and countries. Communism cannot exist without the participation of the whole population in the process of discussion and democratic decision-making, not, as today, by a vote every four or five years, but on a permanent basis—which does not prevent the delegation of powers. Thanks to free time, individuals will be able to take in hand the management of their collective life, which will no longer be left in the hands of professional politicians.

What Marx adds in the third volume of *Capital* to his 1844 argument is the fact that human self-activity—the third moment discussed in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*—requires, in order to flourish, free time, time obtained by reducing the hours of "necessary" work. This reduction is the key that opens the door to the "Kingdom of Freedom," which is also the "Kingdom of Being." Thanks to this time of freedom, human beings will be able to develop their intellectual, artistic, erotic, and playful potential. This is the opposite of the capitalist universe of the infinite accumulation of increasingly useless goods, of productivist and consumerist "expansion" without limits or measure.

Conclusion: beyond his writings that refer directly to nature and to its destruction by capitalist "progress," Marx's work contains reflections that have, at the deepest level, an ecological significance, through their critique of capitalist productivism and their imagination of a society in which free human activity is at the center of social life, and not the obsessive accumulation of "goods." These are essential points of reference for the development of a twenty-first-century eco-Marxism.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Random House/Vintage, 1973).
2. Karl Marx, *Capital* (International Publishers, 1968), vol. 1.
3. Ibid.

4. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970).
5. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967).
6. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, op. cit.
7. *Capital*, Vol. III, Chapter 48.