

# Capitalism, Romanticism, and Nature

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Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy's *Romantic Anti-capitalism and Nature* is an extremely interesting book—enjoyable, informative, and intellectually stimulating.

Naomi Klein says of climate change, “This changes everything.” She is right, and among the things it changes are not only current political perspectives but also our understanding of past texts. The classic example of this is John Bellamy Foster’s reinterpretation of Marx in his key work, *Marx’s Ecology*. I could not say how often I had read these lines from *The German Ideology*:

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, hydrographical, climatic, and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.<sup>1</sup>

But after *Marx’s Ecology*, I read them differently. Foster’s recent book *The Return of Nature* recuperated the radical ecological scientific tradition (Lankester, Engels, Morris, Caudwell, Haldane, Bernal, Needham, and others), and Sayre and Löwy’s *Romantic Anti-capitalism* does something similar for the romantic cultural tradition stretching back to the eighteenth century. The authors examine in turn the American travel writer from the 1770s, William Bartram; Thomas Cole, the American landscape painter from the early nineteenth century; William Morris; Walter Benjamin; Raymond Williams; and the contemporary activist, journalist, and writer Naomi Klein.

Of these, I found the discussion of William Bartram particularly intriguing because he was completely new to me and because of his strikingly modern combining of love for the wilderness and serious respect for its Native American custodians. I was also very pleased to see the comments on the nineteenth-century poet John Clare, whose significance I had not previously appreciated. Of the figures of whom I had previous knowledge, it was the reassessment of Walter Benjamin, highlighting the prescient ecological element in his thinking, that I found most enlightening. However, all the

analyses, including the introductory consideration of Romantic anti-capitalism as a distinct *weltanschauung*, raise important questions of theory and perspective.

The book's central theme is that there exists a romantic anti-capitalist worldview, by no means confined to what is known as "the romantic era" (c. 1775 – 1850), that is characterized as "the romantic protest against modern bourgeois civilization and its destruction of the natural environment, ... a cultural critique, or rebellion, against capitalist-industrialist modernity **in the name of past, pre-modern or pre-capitalist values** [my emphasis – JM]" (1, 4). Further, contained in this worldview are valuable insights for the contemporary struggle to defend the future of humanity and nature in the face of ecological catastrophe. Sayre and Löwy provide much evidence in support of this proposition.

An excellent feature of this work is its interdisciplinary approach embracing "expressions of romantic culture from a wide variety of different areas: literature, travel writing, painting, utopian vision, cultural studies, political philosophy, and activist socio-political writing" (1). Far too much theoretical work remains confined within the narrow boundaries of academic specialisms. Of course it is partly in the nature of both Marxism and ecosocialism to challenge and cross such boundaries. Then there is the fact that, although the book is deeply erudite, as one would expect from its authors, it is nonetheless written in very clear and straightforward language and not in the tortured and almost impenetrable prose of so much academic discourse. This goes hand in hand with the book's intellectually open character. I don't mean by this that it is eclectic or lacking a firm Marxist core but that it demonstrates a commendable ability to engage with and learn from diverse sources and perspectives.

Now to the issues that the book raises and that I want to explore: 1) the truth status of romantic ideas; 2) the problem of critiques of capitalism based on pre-capitalist values; 3) the formulation of the class basis of romanticism; 4) the question of progress; and 5) the "idealist" formulation of ecological anti-capitalism.

### **The Truth Status of Romantic Ideas**

Sayre and Löwy discuss the meaning of "romantic" in academic cultural history, but I think it is useful also to remember that the word has at least two meanings in popular discourse. It refers, of course, to "romantic love" and second, perhaps by association, to notions that are considered fanciful, impractical, and, by implication, not really true. In short, it is often used pejoratively, and I think the pejorative associations still clings to some extent to the academic usage. But should this be so? Let me quote this book at some length:

Romanticism of course does not have a single birth date. But if we wanted to pick one moment as a symbolic starting point it might be 1755, the year in which Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*. This astonishing document constitutes perhaps the first romantic manifesto, with its ferocious critique of modern civilization and celebration of the "noble savage." ...

While Voltaire, the great proponent of Enlightenment and progress, pictures indigenous peoples as anthropophagic barbarians in his philosophical satire *Candide* (1759), the romantic Rousseau sees them as "the true youth of the world." ... The savage "breathes only rest and freedom," while civilized man "works until he dies" and is "proud of his serfdom." In fact, Rousseau emphasizes, the barbarian "refuses to bow his head to the yoke that the civilized person bears without grumbling" and prefers the most dangerous freedom to the most peaceful submission. In a passage that seems almost to foresee anticolonial struggles, Rousseau argues that the love of freedom is so strong among "savages" that they "are willing

to face hunger, fire, iron, and death to keep their independence.” Although the philosopher’s “state of nature” may be a fiction, his portrayal of the life of primitive peoples is almost surely based on travellers’ reports. Rousseau in any case often explicitly refers in his essay to specific groups: Hottentots, Caribbeans, and “savages of the Americas.”

In the *Discourse* Rousseau also denounces modern destructive behavior towards the natural world. He admires “the immense forests that the felling axe never mutilated,” and regrets that civilization has made of the human being a “tyrant over himself and over nature.” Worried that the expansion of agriculture might lead to “the destruction of the soil,” of its fertility, that is, he quotes a passage from Buffon’s *Natural History* (1752). (6-7)

My point here is that the “romantic” Rousseau’s picture of “the noble savage,” the indigenous foragers, has proved far more factually accurate than that of “Enlightenment man” Voltaire, as has been shown by anthropological work such as Marshall Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics* and Richard Borshack Lee’s study of the Kung!San. A similar empirical validity applies to Rousseau’s concerns about forest felling and soil destruction.

I am not, of course, saying that all assertions and conceptions advanced by romantic thinkers are factually true any more than all assertions made by social scientists or even Marxists turn out to be factually true, merely that the label “romantic” should not be seen as *prima facie* evidence of lack of empirical validity. I think it is likely that Sayre and Löwy would agree with this point, but I thought it was worth drawing out.

Then there is the question of metaphorical truth. Sayre and Löwy’s adoption of Weber’s phrase “the enchanted garden” (as applied to “Asiatic cultures, with their magical beliefs”) immediately brought to my mind Colin Turnbull’s, highly “romantic” anthropological study of the Mbuti pygmies of the Congo, *The Forest People*. My point is not that the “magical” beliefs of these people and their “enchanted” sense of oneness with their forest environment and its other inhabitants are literally true, but they may express a metaphorical truth about their relationship with nature. If later religion is “the heart of a heartless world” and “the opium of the people,” should these “magical” beliefs be seen not just as a product of ignorance but as an expression of an unalienated and thus vibrantly intense relationship to nature? For a contemporary example of what I mean, take the great paintings of Van Gogh. His depictions of cypress trees and stars in the night sky are expressions of emotional intensity, not inaccurate representations due to lack of knowledge of dendrology and astronomy.

### **Critique of Capitalism Based on Pre-capitalist Values.**

Sayre and Löwy cite this type critique as the defining characteristic of romantic anti-capitalism, and I think that is right, but it raises the question of which pre-capitalist values. In Chapter 3 of *The Origin of the Family*,<sup>2</sup> Engels critiqued capitalist politics and society from the standpoint of the Iroquois gens; William Morris condemned modern capitalist production in comparison with the artistic qualities of artisan production in the Middle Ages, and they both drew revolutionary socialist conclusions. Others criticized modern capitalism in the name of an idealized picture of the feudal social order and drew highly reactionary conclusions. Marx and Engels discuss this in *The Communist Manifesto* in the section on “Feudal Socialism,” and this outlook had considerable cultural influence in the twentieth century, for example in the literary work of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound (who was led by it into outright fascism), and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Moreover, while it remains the case that socialists today can and should invoke the values of foraging societies and indigenous peoples, especially in terms of their relations to nature, socialist criticism of contemporary society also needs to be on the basis of the existing values of the modern working class, especially the values of social solidarity engendered in collective struggle. There is

also a role for values drawn from the future in terms of an appreciation of the potential for human development generated by capitalist production but inhibited by capitalist inequality and priorities. As Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*,

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.<sup>3</sup>

This leads directly to the question of the class basis of the romantic outlook.

### **The Class Basis of Romanticism**

Here, I am not satisfied with the way this is posed by Sayre and Löwy. In their conclusion they write, "The social origins of the figures we have discussed are by no means homogeneous, showing that the general perspective they have in common is not determined in any mechanistic way by social class" (129). In itself this is clearly true, but for Marxism it is not the social origin of authors that indicates the class basis of their outlook, it is the class to which they are drawn and whose interests they represent and articulate. From this perspective we have not one romanticism but several, depending on to which class they are affiliated. Thus, Shelley and Morris are romantics who are drawn to, perhaps pulled by, the working class, despite being not the least proletarian in origin, whereas others like Wordsworth, Keats, and D.H. Lawrence (the son of a miner) are not. In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels variously designate bourgeois socialism, petty bourgeois socialism, feudal/aristocratic socialism. Perhaps we should similarly distinguish different romanticisms.

### **The Question of Progress**

Sayre and Löwy hail Walter Benjamin as "the first Marxist thinker to break with the ideology of 'progress'" (130). If by the ideology of progress is meant a deterministic belief in the inevitability of progress (and of socialism) then this is certainly to Benjamin's credit, though Gramsci, at the very least, preceded him. But if what is implied is a denial of any progress and that history is simply a growing pile of debris, then this seems to me very problematic. In my view, the development of the forces of production, which has been immense, is real progress in the potential of human beings to use nature to meet human needs. It increases our ability to feed people, it increases our life expectancy, and it increases our capacity to understand our world and our universe. However, the degree to which this potential is realized is hugely impacted by the nature of the relations of production, and the fact that those relations are alienated and exploitative means that every increase in human productive potential is simultaneously an increase in the potential for destruction of both humans and nature. Thus the future of humanity, indeed its very survival, is in no way guaranteed or inevitable but will depend on the outcome of struggle.

### **The "Idealist" Formulation of Ecological Anti-capitalism**

This is somewhat removed from the central theme of the book and not a disagreement, merely a comment prompted by Sayre and Löwy's observations on Naomi Klein. They describe Klein's *This Changes Everything* as a "superlative" book, but they also criticize Klein's tendency to employ idealist formulations about capitalism:

Klein's way of presenting the forces responsible for disastrous climate change is far from the Marxist approach to capitalism as a mode of production. She often seems to see the culprit as being mainly an ideology—market fundamentalism, free-trade orthodoxy, the extractivist mind-

set (19, 25, 63, 86, 443, 459 – 460)—and the struggle for change as a “battle of world-views.” Of course ideology is important. ... But putting the primary emphasis on ideas risks leading to a purely “idealist” view of the process, instead of a systemic “materialist” one. (117)

This is a valid criticism, and I would add that Klein’s tendency here is not accidental. It is both reflective of the current broad environmental movement and appealing to it. It is a movement that, in general, instinctively much prefers idealist to materialist formulations and thinking, partly for class reasons. The idealist formulation is also related to Klein’s, and the movement’s, ambiguity on the question of reform or revolution. If what needs to be changed is basically an “attitude” or “mind-set” rather than a set of material social relations of production, this leaves open the possibility of the required change being achieved without resort to an actual physical revolution. Undoubtedly, Klein’s vagueness on this issue greatly increases her reach, popularity, and influence and thus may even be a conscious strategy. Unfortunately, I think it is also an illusion.

This in turn has a bearing on a wider concern, which is connected to the central argument of *Romantic Anti-capitalism*. While it is true that the romantic tradition contains many insights that are helpful to incorporate into the movement today, and Sayre and Löwy perform a service by highlighting this, there is also the danger that romanticism and romantic formulations can be used to obscure the hard reality of what will be required to overthrow capitalism, namely proletarian revolution, and this should be guarded against.

There is much more to be said, but I will stop here and simply reiterate my commendation of this book for its range of insights and multiplicity of provocative ideas.

#### Notes

1. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm).
2. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch03.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch03.htm).
3. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm).