

Marx and His Idea on Environment and Ecology

Taniya Basu Majumder (Das)¹

There is a virtually universal agreement among contemporary sociologists that Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber have been the three major classical sociological theorists. There has also been a general agreement among the environmental sociologists that the classical sociological tradition has been inhospitable to the nurturing of ecologically informed sociological theory and research². Much of the blame has been placed on the anthropocentric legacies of the classical theorists – specifically that each classical theorist has emphasized the necessary sociological primacy of explanations of social phenomena, to the neglect of incorporating ecological variables in such analyses. Hence, there remains a prevailing view that contemporary sociological theory has developed with an implicit taboo against incorporating ecological variables in their analyses³.

Today⁴ we are confronting the problem of ecological survival on a planetary scale. The western models of capitalist industrial development exist as the dominating development paradigm. Since globalization and liberalization loomed large, this model of development is actually preparing a recipe for disaster. With the emergence of modern environmentalism and the gaining of popularity of the concept of ‘sustainable development’, there is a present and ongoing search for an alternative paradigm of development to save the planet earth from ecological disasters. People of many hues and cries are involved in this process- many ‘isms’ are invoked.

It would, however, be misleading to suggest that the classical theorists ignored environmental and human relationship phenomena. As gifted thinkers whose sociologies spanned all major social institutions across an awesome range of time and space, each was significantly aware of the natural biological i.e., in turn man and environment substratum of material life. Indeed, it can be argued that a meaning full environmental sociology can be fashioned from the works of the three classical theorists. Moreover, this classical environment sociology is not merely methodological postures of abstract theoretical arguments, but instead consists of concrete empirical materials assembled by Marx, Durkheim and Weber.

-
- 1 Lecturer in Sociology, Department of Law, University of North Bengal.
 - 2 Catton, W. and R. Dunlap (1980) ‘A New Ecological Paradigm for Post-exuberant Sociology’, *American Behavioral Scientist* 24: 15 – 47.
 - 3 Buttel H.Frederick. 1986. “Sociology and the environment: the winding toward human ecology”. *Internal Social Science Journal*. Vol.XXXVIII, No.3, Pp.338-343.
 - 4 Mukhopadhyay Ambarish, “Marxism and Ecology: Some Reflections”, *Journal of Society and Change*, Vol.XII, No. I, pp.49.

Here we would talk about Marxist idea of ecology and environment.

Although apart from the tendency toward economic crisis as an intrinsic characteristic of capitalism, there is a second fundamental form of contemporary crises that is also derived from the relentless pursuit of profits—namely the rapid growth of ecological degradation. Besides the two classical sociologists this present paper discusses about Marx's idea of ecology. Marx based his whole outlook on resolving the alienated relationship between humanity and nature. His ecology was both scientific and socialist. Marx was a part of 19th century movement which overthrew official natural and social science in a revolutionary sweep. Marx was much more inspired by the work of Charles Darwin, who showed how nature evolves as a result of the process of natural selection, producing new species over time.

The present paper is rather a modest attempt to point out some of the basic ecological ingredients of Marx's ideas and to suggest that Marxism and ecology are in no sense of incompatible as is believed it to be.

In the time period in which Karl Marx wrote, the environment was far less of an issue, and Marx's work was not highly concerned environment or the environmental problems i.e. the adverse relation between the man and the environment. Despite this, there are some important contributions to the theory of environment made by Marx.

After decades of explorations of Marx's contributions to ecological discussions, it is no longer a question of whether Marx addressed nature, and did so throughout his life, but whether he can be said to have developed an understanding of the nature-society dialectic that constitutes a crucial starting point for understanding the ecological crisis of capitalist society.

A great many analysts, are prepared to acknowledge that Marx had profound insights into the environmental problem, but nonetheless argue that these insights were marginal to his work, that he never freed himself from 'Prometheanism' (a term usually meant to refer to an extreme commitment to industrialization at any cost), and that he did not leave a significant ecological legacy that carried forward into later socialist thought or that had any relation to the subsequent development of ecology. In a recent discussion a number of authors argued that Marx could not have contributed anything of fundamental relevance to the development of ecological thought, since he wrote in the 19th century, before the nuclear age and before the appearance of PCBs, CFCs and DDT—and because he never used the word 'ecology' in his writings. Any discussion of his work in terms of ecology was therefore a case of taking 120 years of ecological thinking since Marx's death and laying it 'at Marx's feet'⁵.

5 Mukhopadhyay Ambarish, "Marxism and Ecology: Some Reflections", *Journal of Society and Change*, Vol.XII, No. I, pp.45

According to Bellamy Foster it can be argued that “It was labour that constituted the secret, from the very first, not only to the development of human society but also to the transition of ape to man. It was labour, moreover that defined the distinctive ecological niche occupied by humanity. Marx and Engels thus saw the human relation to the earth in co-evolutionary terms – a perspective that is crucial to an ecological understanding, since it allows us to recognize that human beings transform their environment not entirely in accordance with their choosing but based on conditions provided by natural history⁶.”

Marx and Engels argued that under capitalism all natural and human relationships have been dissolved into money relationships. They earnestly looked forward for a social order that would promote the many-sided development to human capacities and the rationale humane relation to nature of which we are a part⁷.

Denouncing Marx for lack of ecological concerns in his ideas and writings is not new. It is common for the critics to argue that the world view of Marx and Engels was rooted before all else in the extreme technological subjugation of nature. This is the primary context in which their theoretical contributions must be judged, and hence, Marxism and ecology are never fully compatible. The ecological critique of Marxism basically concentrates on the following points⁸.

1. One of the major complaints is that Marx adopted a ‘Promethean’ (pro-technological, anti-ecological) and ‘productivist’ view of history and failed to address the exploitation of nature. The charge of Prometheanism is one of the most serious of the ecological criticisms of Marx. Marx is thus seen as one of our age’s most devout worshippers of the machine who adopted an extreme productivist point of view.

2. The second argument of the critics follows from the first. It is stated that in Marx’s view, capitalist technology and economic development had solved all problems of ecological limits, and that the future society of associated producers would exist under conditions of abundance

3. It is further argued that, Marx had shown very little interest in- the issues of science and or in the effects of technology on the environment. Hence he had no real scientific basis for the analysis of ecological issue

4. The critics also state that whatever statements in Marx’s writings are found about ecological problems are only passing remarks and have no systematic relation to the main body of his work.

6 Foster Bellamy John. 2002. “Capitalism and Ecology: The Nature of the Contradiction”. Analytical Monthly Review, Vol-54, No-4, September, pp. 6-16.

7 (Marx & Engels, ‘The Communist Manifesto’. P. 40).

8 Mukhopadhyay Ambarish, “Marxism and Ecology: Some Reflections”, Journal of Society and Change, Vol.XII, No. I, pp. 42.

Marx has been further denounced for being 'speciesist' in his ecological thinking. It has been argued that he radically disconnected human beings from animals and took side with the former over the latter.

Such criticisms are no doubt over-simplistic. In fact, the works of Marx and Engels contain a number of remarkable ecological insights, which was so unusual among the nineteenth century thinkers. Such insights were derived from their early recognition of the essential point that sustainability must lie at the core of human relation to nature in any future society. Therefore, they cannot be simply condemned out as anti-ecological. They denounced the spoliation of nature before a modern bourgeois ecological conscience was born. Marx's notion of the alienation of human labour was connected to an understanding of the alienation of human beings from nature.

The charge of Prometheism is one of the most serious of the ecological criticisms of Marx. Marx is thus seen as one of our age's most devout worshippers of the machine who adopted an extreme productivist point of view. We must keep it in mind that Marx was not the only thinker attracted to the ancient mythology of Prometheus, the predominant cultural hero of the entire Romantic period. Many other intellectuals Rubens, Dante, Milton, Byron - to name a few - incorporated Prometheus as a central motif in their works. Moreover, Prometheus stands in western culture not only for technology but even more for creativity, revolution and, rebellion against the gods (against religion). Marx in his works invoked Prometheus more as a symbol of revolution than as a symbol of technology. It is true that Marx and Engels in their writings have occasionally used such terms as, 'the mastery of nature', 'the domination of nature' and so on. But mere use of such phrases does not necessarily establish that they adopted an extreme productivist point of view. In fact, in their writings they have made it amply clear that humanity and nature are interrelated: the historically specific form of production relation constituting the core of that interrelationship in given period.

Therefore, apart from above critics, this present paper is rather a preliminary attempt to point out some of the basic ecological ingredients of Marx's ideas and to suggest that Marxism and ecology are in no sense incompatible as the mainstream environmentalist sociology believes it to be.

In the time period in which Karl Marx wrote, there is no denying of the fact that at that period of time environment was hardly a matter of concern, either popularly or scholarly. However, there exist several such occasions where Marx had showed grave concern for environment and ecology.

The environment was primarily seen by Marx as a medium of human labour. He felt that nature was to be used by humans for their production purposes. Marx saw that the rapid growth of capitalist economy was achieved by exploitation; the exploitation of one social class i.e. proletariat by another i.e. bourgeoisie. Under this circumstance all values and relations including environmental one,

becomes sub-ordinate to monetary or commercial one i.e. market orientation.

‘On the Jews Question’ he thus posits the argument that, “The view of nature attained under the domination of private property and money, is real contempt for, and practical debasement of nature.....” i.e. all creatures have been turned into property, the fishes in the water, the birds in the air, the plants on the earth. The creatures must become free. Thus it may be argued that while Marx and Engels clearly showed the exploitative nature of capitalism, they nonetheless stress the destructive violence of this mode of production over natural resources. This became clear, when he argued in Capital (Vol-1), that every advance in capitalist agriculture is advanced in order not only of robbing the worker, but also robbing the soil; such progress in the long run, therefore leads to the ruin of the permanent sources of the fertility of the soil. Capitalist production therefore only develops the techniques and organization of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the growth of all wealth: the land and the worker⁹.

Again in Capital -III (chapter 46) one experiences the sustainability ethos of Marx when he expressly refers to the obligation of human beings to preserve the ecological preconditions of human life for future generations. It is worth noting that, way back in 1863 and 1883, when Capital Vol-3 was written down, he insists that, “Even a whole society, a nation, or all contemporary societies taken together, are not the absolute owners of the earth. They are only its occupants, its beneficiaries and must hand it down to the succeeding generations in improved conditions¹⁰.

Environment and Ecology in capitalist Society: A critique

Marx’s concern for ecological issues is closely connected with his notion of ‘alienation’. For Marx, though it was Hegel who had first advanced the notion of the alienation of human labour. But, to Marx, Hegel was unable to perceive the self-alienation of human practical activity as the basis of people’s estrangement not only from themselves, but also from their real relation to the nature.

Marx’s notion of the alienation of nature and the alienation of labour were both grounded in his understanding of the political-economic thrust of capitalist society. For Marx, the domination of the earth meant both the domination of the earth by those who monopolized land and hence, the elemental powers of nature, and also the domination of the earth and of dead matter (representing the power of the landlord and the capitalist) over the vast majority of human beings. For Marx, the system of private property was antagonistic to nature. He also referred to the ecological degradation and pollution to be found in large towns. Marx and

⁹ Marx, Capital, Vol.1 (New York: Vintage: 1976) p. 638.

¹⁰ Marx, Capital, Vol.3, p.959.

Engels argued that the chief source of ecological destruction under capitalism was the extreme antagonism of town and country, a characteristic of capitalist organization as fundamental to the system as the division between capital and labour¹¹.

Marx vividly describes the horrible consequences of the alienation of the workers in the large towns. It had reached the point where light, air, cleanliness were no longer part of man's existence; but rather darkness, polluted air and untreated sewage constituted their material environment. Such alienation of humanity and nature forfeited not only creative work, but the essential elements of life itself. Engels also approached the issue of ecological destruction and the alienation of man from nature with equal brilliance.

Capitalist society is dominated by private property and the exchange of commodities for profit. This produces a double alienation – firstly, the alienation of human beings from the land, town from country; and secondly, the alienation of the worker from the product of his/her labour in industrial production.

This alienation even applies to animals, as Marx showed in his book *'The German Ideology'*: "The essence of the fish is its being, water. The essence of the freshwater fish is the water of a river. But the latter ceases to be the essence of the fish and is no longer a suitable medium of existence as soon as the river is made to serve industry, as soon as it is polluted by dyes and other waste products and navigated by steamboats, or as soon as its water is diverted into canals where simple drainage can deprive the fish of its medium of existence." Therefore the fish's essence – its nature – is alienated away from it as a result of the private ownership of the water sources¹².

Marx wrote in *Grundrisse*, a preparatory work on political economy: "It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation, or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital¹³."

This contains the essence of Marx's entire critique of the alienating character of bourgeois society. A linked idea put forward by Marx that under capitalism there is a "metabolic rift" between man and nature.

Perhaps the clearest exposition of ecological thought is presented by Marx through the concept of 'metabolic rift'. Marx utilized the concept of metabolism

11 Marx & Engels, 'The Communist Manifesto'. P.10

12 Marx & Engels, "The German Ideology", 1932.

13 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1939-41.

throughout his mature works to his overall critique of political economy and has employed the word for the natural process of production in the material exchange between man and nature. The concept of metabolism is used to refer to the specific regulatory process that grown the complex interrelationship between organisms and their environment. Marx's own use of the concept is in order to explain the relationship of human labour to its environment especially in the field of agriculture.

Marx sums up his critique of capitalist agriculture in Volume 1 of *Capital*. According to him "All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress toward ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility...Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the technique and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker¹⁴."

Metabolism is regulated from the side of nature by natural laws governing the various physical processes involved and from the side of the society by institutionalized norms growing the division of labour and distribution of wealth etc. Marx therefore, employed the concept both to refer to the actual metabolic interaction between nature and society through human labour, and in a broader sense, to describe the complex, dynamic, and interdependent set of needs and relations brought into being and constantly reproduced in alienated from under capitalism, and the question of human freedom that it raised. The concept of metabolism thus, took on both a specific ecological meaning and a wider social meaning.

The rift in metabolic relationship between human being the nature results particularly in the form of contradiction intrinsic to large-scale industry and large-scale agriculture under capitalism, with the former providing the latter with the means of intensive exploitation of the soil. For Marx, this was part of the natural course of capitalist development.

To sum up the whole discourse of Marx's idea regarding ecology, it may be argued that, through science and technology humanity would progress to develop greater control over nature, but in doing so, people would free themselves from dependency on environment, they become mastering it instead of being enslaved by it. In present time two schools of Marxist thought have emerged on ecological issues. The first is the 'humanist' group which draws its ideas from younger Marx and the second the 'orthodox' branch, which takes its ideas from writings of an elderly Marx.

The humanist eco-Marxist attempt is to cover the current environmental

14 Marx, *Capital*, Vol.1 (New York: Vintage: 1976) p. 950.

crisis in their analysis. This group contents Marx view of technology and says that some level of production may have to be forgone for the sake of the environment. Merely, overthrowing of the capitalist class is insufficient according to this branch; the proletarian government must also limit its destruction of the environment.

Orthodox Marxism blames capitalism for environmental problems. This group would promote science and technological development for the sake of mastering nature. While this may harm nature, so according to the Marxist ideology, one major objective would certainly be to learn enough about the environment to save it and all of its inhabitants.

It is perhaps clear from the discussions made so far that Marx cannot simply be condemned out as anti-ecological. Throughout his lives he has consistently expressed his concerns about ecological issues and the question of sustainability in the volumes he wrote. The attempt made in the present paper to focus on some of those is, issues just like the tip of the iceberg. It is only a preliminary scanning of some of the major works of Marx which consist exemplary evidences of his serious concerns for saving the planet earth, many remains, needless to say, to be explored.

It may be concluded that, while Marx and Engels clearly show the exploitative nature of capitalism, they nonetheless stress the destructive violence of this mode of production over natural resources. This become clear when Marx argued in 'Capital' [Vol-1] that, every advance capitalist agriculture is advance in anti not only of robbing the worker, but also of robbing the soil; such progress in the long run; theref]re; leads to the ruin the permanent source of fertility of the soil. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and organization of the capital process of production by simultaneously undermining the growth of all wealth: land and the worker¹⁵.

15 Marx, Capital, Vol.1 (New York: Vintage: 1976) p. 950.