

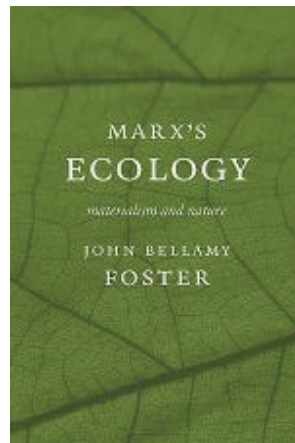
## Ecological Roots: Which Go Deepest?

by [Helena Sheehan](#)

John Bellamy Foster *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*

New York: Monthly Review Press 2000 300pp \$18 paperback

Review for *Monthly Review* (Vol 52, No 5) 2000



"Oh no, not another great, thick, fat book on Marx!" thought Richard Lewontin when he saw this new book by John Bellamy Foster. I have to confess (despite the fact that I, too, have written a big book on Marxism) to a similar reaction. However, as he goes on to say in the book's blurb, "as soon as I started to read, I found it hard to put down." With this, too, I concur.

This is a lucid, engaged, scholarly, substantial book. It takes a landscape of intellectual history and a series of texts that may be familiar to *MR* readers, but interrogates and interprets them in a new way. Whether the reader already knows much of this terrain or is exploring it for the first time, this book is an excellent guide.

John Bellamy Foster charts the evolution of thought of a large cast of characters, including himself. He explains that Marx has often been characterized as an anti-ecological thinker. This he always knew not to be the case, but only in later years did he come to realize how central was the ecological dimension of Marx's thought.

Basically, Foster has changed sides in the debates between two currents within Marxism. The classical Marxist tradition, associated with those from Engels forward who refused to cede the whole realm of the natural sciences to positivism, sought to work out a materialist worldview that embraced both human society and the natural world. The other tradition, associated with neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian polemics against positivism and embraced by the Frankfurt School and much of the new left, argued against the idea of the dialectic of nature and the involvement of Marxism with the natural sciences. Citing many influences, from rereading Marx himself to the legacy of

*Monthly Review* to another strain of the new left associated with scientists such as Levins, Lewontin, and Gould, Foster has come to argue for a comprehensive materialism that embraces both the physical and social realms.

The "western Marxist" tradition saw a basic breach between a humanist Marx and a positivist Engels and tended to see everything admirable in the subsequent history of the left as grounded in the former and everything that went astray in the latter. However, a rigorous examination of text and context makes the assertion of such a theoretical gulf between Marx and Engels untenable. It is good to see one more work vindicating the very progressive and intelligent philosophical legacy of Engels. A quote from Engels bearing on the relation of the natural world to human society still seems very fresh in its resonance with the ecological consciousness of our own time:

Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage of all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.

A particularly interesting feature of Foster's telling of the story is his claim that Soviet ecology in the 1920s was arguably the most advanced in the world because, while western models tended to be reductionist, linear, and teleological, Soviet thinking was more dynamic, dialectically complex, holistic, and coevolutionary. He cites Vernadsky's analysis of the biosphere and Vavilov's work on genetic diversity, as well as Lenin's and Lunacharsky's policies of environmental protection. Things took a different turn, of course, after the ascendancy of Stalin and the first five-year plan, when conservation was attacked as "bourgeois" and when the more ecological thinkers were purged.

Among the purged was Bukharin. Although I thought that I knew what there was to be known about Bukharin's philosophical writings, I discovered from this book that new manuscripts have been unearthed since I did my own research on Soviet philosophy of science. How amazing that Bukharin, in the midst of the trials, tribulations, and terrors of the Lubyanka, wrote four book-length manuscripts: an autobiographical novel (*How It All Began*), a book of poetry (*The Transformation of the World*), a treatise on socialism (*Socialism and Its Culture*), and a wide-ranging philosophical work (*Philosophical Arabesques*). These manuscripts were only discovered during the *glasnost* years under Gorbachev. *How It All Began* and *Philosophical Arabesques* were published in Russian in the 1990s. The former appeared in English in 1998 and the latter is forthcoming. Foster has evidently seen drafts of an English translation of *Philosophical Arabesques* from *Monthly Review* Press, which he interprets as showing Bukharin to be a truly deep ecological thinker, even beyond his writings in this area that were already known.

Another achievement of *Monthly Review* Press was to keep Caudwell's *Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture* in print for so many years. Foster sings the praises, music to my ears, of this brief, brilliant, breathtaking presence in the history of Marxism. Caudwell's integrative insight, his ability to break through all of the characteristic dichotomies, all the one-sided emphases on organism or environment, rather than on their mutually determining relations, allowed him to bridge dialectically the great epistemological divide. He captured the essence of an ecological worldview, which eluded so many others, according to Foster.

The title *Marx's Ecology* does not really do justice to this book, so vast is the scope of its examination of thinkers before and after Marx and so contemporary is its argument. The large cast of players in Foster's "literary detective story" ranges from Democritus and Epicurus through Feuerbach, Malthus, and Darwin to Engels, Bukharin, Bernal, Haldane, Caudwell, and many more. It is actually a history of materialism. Then the history of materialism is brought to bear in a polemic against antimaterialist tendencies in contemporary ecological movements.

At the core of this book is the assertion of the centrality of ecology to a materialist conception of nature and history and the centrality of a materialist conception of nature and history to ecology. A whole history of conflicting interpretations informs an analysis of current concerns.

Foster argues that the entire history of materialist approaches to nature and human existence stands in need of reassessment. He takes on the tendency within contemporary green thought to attribute the entire course of ecological degradation to the emergence of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century and Bacon's idea of the "domination of nature," which is seen as embodying an anthropocentric, exploitative mechanism to which a romanticist, organicist, vitalist postmodernism can be opposed. This dualist perspective has led much of the contemporary ecological movement to a crude rejection of modernity and science, to caricatures of the enlightenment and of Marxism, and to irrationalist myopia.

Once the ecological dimension is reconceived in this way and grounded in a realist epistemology and materialist ontology, it can be seen that the obstacles to a rational metabolism of nature and society lie not in modernity, not in science, not in materialism, but in the capitalist mode of production.

If anyone wants to understand the place of the ecological dimension within the Marxist tradition, this book is a must. Or, coming at it from another angle, if anyone wants to grapple with alternative philosophical bases for contemporary ecological concerns, this book traces the various roots and shows which go deepest.

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