



BOOK REVIEWS

Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: a Red and Green Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 312, \$45, ISBN 0-312-21940-7.

Paul Burkett's *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* would ground ecology in classical Marxist thought. Many Greens, even those friendly to Marxism, question the relevance of core Marxist beliefs to the ongoing ecological crisis, or blame such beliefs for environmental degradation in socialist countries. Their critiques arise from post-scarcity thought of the kind manifested by the Frankfurt School. Society in this view suffers from surfeit of production and desire that only a radical critique can overcome. Consumer goods addiction leads to environmental crisis as corporations neglect the common good to satisfy market demands. While accounting for consumerism, Burkett argues that the capitalist mode of production itself is the root of environmental problems.

One of the main criticisms of Marxism from radical environmentalism is that it follows a "Promethean" logic that takes nature for granted. It sees Marxism as viewing nature as raw input to the labor process, out of which pours commodities for a ravenous consuming public. Only a philosophy that questions unconstrained industrial growth can curb such "productivist" excesses.

Burkett takes up the arguments of Andrew McLaughlin, Enzo Mingione, and Ted Benton, who feel that Marx was squarely in the Enlightenment tradition. This tradition allegedly holds that human progress hinges on the subjugation of nature to human purposes. McLaughlin states, "For Marxism, there is simply no basis for recognizing any interest in the liberation of nature from human domination." Mingione points to a rigid need to develop the forces of production in Marx, which solely can guarantee future liberation. Benton sees Marxism as sharing "the blindness to natural limits already present in ... the spontaneous ideology of 19th century industrialism."

Burkett responds to these criticisms by first of all initially accepting their plausibility. With frequent references in Marx to the need for developing the productive forces of social labor, such a conclusion does not seem far-fetched. Digging deeper into Marx, Burkett questions support for the proposition that the historic superiority of capitalism is "based on an anthropomorphic preference for material wealth over nature." By removing constraints on the natural and social character of humanity, capitalism in theory offers potentially richer and more environmentally conducive values.

But even with this vision of an emancipating capitalism, Marx understood the negative dialectic that would undermine this tendency in the long run. It socializes production but only in an "antithetical form" due to the class-exploitative and alienating character of production. Although all societies are

exploitative, it is capitalism alone that exacerbates environmental problems to the breaking point. By concentrating the producers and separating them from the necessary conditions of production, including natural conditions, capitalism undermines humanity's ability to develop itself.

Burkett also believes that the labor theory of value—the heart of Marxist political economy—is of utmost relevance for a socialist ecology. This seems puzzling since the labor theory of value most often comes into play within an entirely different context—to refute the claim that prices and profit are a function of supply and demand, or rewards for entrepreneurial initiative. Marxists point to labor's creation of value based on the exploitative wage relationship. Nature as such has rarely entered the picture in this ongoing debate. Burkett writes, "The notion that Marx's labor theory of value might provide an important ecological perspective might seem strange, given the popular view that this theory excludes or downgrades nature's importance as a condition of and limiting factor in human production."

The key for Burkett is nature's role in the contradiction between production of use values and exchange values. Production of use values characterized precapitalist societies, which yield to the production of exchange values in capitalist society. Use values consist solely of natural materials modified by human labor, such as the clothing and crops that self-sustaining farmers produce. Exchange values emerge from commodity circulation, where goods yield cash equivalents. Cash then becomes new commodities in a new round of exchange. Capital exploits labor to produce commodities that are greater in value than the wage of the workers who produce them. From the capitalist standpoint, this represents profit. From the Marxist standpoint, it is exploitation only of a more recent vintage than the serfdom and chattel slavery that preceded it.

Capitalist production not only exploits labor, but nature as well. Competition drives the capitalist system. Accumulation of capital requires ever-increasing demands on the worker and on nature itself. While the work-day extends, the surrounding countryside turns into a toxic dump in order to meet production quotas. Objectification of humanity and nature go hand in hand. Marx describes this process as a system of "self-estranged natural and spiritual individuality."

Scholars have not tended to view Marx as having an interest in ecological topics per se. However, the discussion of agriculture throughout *Capital* not only illustrates the relevance of his value theory to a Green analysis, but its superiority in Burkett's eyes to competing analyses. The pressure to produce short-term solutions undercuts capitalist agriculture's ability to create sustainable wealth production as clean water and soil fertility suffer in the process. While the contemporary Green movement is acutely aware of the problem of erosion, only Marx sees the problem as rooted in the capitalist mode of production itself. Burkett cites Marx's prescient thoughts on the problem in *Capital*: "in capitalist agriculture ... all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility." Furthermore, "the vitality of the soil is squandered, and his prodigality is carried by commerce far beyond the borders of a particular state."

While most of Burkett's book is a reply to non-Marxist Green thinkers on the left, he also presents a cogent counter-analysis to Marxist economist James O'Connor, whose theory of the Second Contradiction influenced a generation of eco-socialists through his journal, *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism*. O'Connor's *first* contradiction refers to an accumulation crisis brought on by an inability to realize profit through commodity sales, a phenomenon of overproduction. The *second* contradiction involves nature itself, which capitalism degrades because of its tendency to erode conditions of production. This arises from the system's tendency to externalize costs. For example, oil and coal companies need to expand production in order to resolve the first contradiction. Increased production yields increased greenhouse emissions, hence a greater threat of global warming, a threat to the capitalist system overall.

Burkett questions the artificial separation of these two contradictions. His scholarly presentation of Marx's own stated beliefs on the interrelationship of natural and class exploitation in the production of commodities is primary. Furthermore, it is not certain that rising external costs from capital's use of natural and social conditions entail a profit decline. The capitalist system might respond to problems of pollution and soil erosion by generating corporations that address these problems from the standpoint of profit opportunities. Clearly, Burkett has in mind the myriad of "environmental" clean-up companies whose charter is to take toxic byproducts from wealthy urban centers and foist them on economically marginal and politically weak areas such as Indian reservations and rural black communities.

Although Burkett's book is an unqualified success in its stated goals, there is a critical question that requires additional discussion and clarification among Marxists searching for a combined Red and Green perspective.

This involves the relationship of a certain kind of existing precapitalist society to nature today. While capitalism has a relatively emancipatory logic *vis-a-vis* precapitalist social formations such as chattel slavery or serfdom, there are indigenous societies around the world under siege from multinational corporations. How do they fit into this schema?

In nearly every instance, the clash is over how to use nature. Indigenous peoples tend to value nature as a communal economic and spiritual resource, while the multinationals—in most cases, energy corporations—view it as a raw input to commodity production. Is the spread of capitalist property relations in the Amazon rainforest an advance over precapitalist modes of production?

This question took on burning political urgency after FARC left-wing guerrillas killed three indigenous activists in Colombia recently who were working with the U'Wa Indians. While the FARC gives lip service to indigenous rights, it has tended to view groups such as the U'Wa as an awkward reminder of precapitalist societies that do not fit neatly into a Marxist sociological paradigm of peasants and wage laborers, who are their targeted social base. In addition, the ELN, the other main guerrilla group, has repeatedly blown up oil pipelines on U'Wa tribal lands, ruining traditional fishing and hunting grounds. While oil company incursion poses the greatest threat to U'Wa existence, the Marxist left has shown itself to be an uncertain ally of indigenous peoples. For a Red and Green perspective to be fully evolved, it requires much more sensitivity to

precapitalist social formations like the U'Wa than has historically been the case. These communal societies have too often have been seen from a Social Darwinist rather than a socialist perspective, as losers in a survival of the fittest contest. A Red-Green movement should instead solidarize with people like the U'Wa.

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Jeff Lipkes, *Politics, Religion and Classical Political Economy in Britain: John Stuart Mill and His Followers* (London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1999) pp. ix, 228, \$79.95, ISBN 0-312-21741-2.

“Whoever professes to raise the position of a class without elevating its character is a charlatan” (Leslie Stephen, cited in Lipkes, p. 109).

More than any analytical or methodological framework, this conviction united John Stuart Mill and the Blackheath Park Circle late in his career. Lipkes examines the views of the Mill Circle—consisting of John Morley, J. E. Cairnes, Henry Fawcett, William Thomas Thornton, and T. E. Cliffe Leslie—in order to explain how and why they diverged from Mill and, in addition, whether the group retained any semblance of cohesiveness. He argues that religious views go some distance towards explaining both the divergences and the similarities.

This is a welcome book. While the early years of Marginalism have been much studied, less attention has been accorded to the period leading up to 1871. What we have on Mill's later years consists mainly of studies that compartmentalize the Blackheath Park Circle into dissenters or followers of Classical economics. Mill's recantation of the wages fund doctrine following Thornton's publication of the *Fortnightly Review* articles that became *On Labour* (1870), has received much attention (see, e.g., Stigler 1982). Cliffe Leslie and the Historical School have also been examined (Koot 1987). Here, by contrast, we have both dissenters and followers in one study that starts from the neglected observation that these writers all shared a longstanding friendship with Mill. In addition, and also welcome, Lipkes considers how the Circle influenced Mill, by examining how Mill's views evolved late in his life and whether such turnabouts arose, at least in part, as a result of his close contact with the more heretical views held by some of these writers.

The common thread uniting the Blackheath Park Circle is a deep-seated conviction favoring the improvement of mankind, and this emerges as a central theme of the book. Lipkes argues that Mill's growing religiosity implied an increasing propensity to favor the “good” (p. 15); social and economic amelioration of the laboring classes took precedence over political emancipation (p. 21). Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1861) reflects his conviction that policy must encourage moral and intellectual progress (p. 31). Standing alone, such observations will not reorient our understanding of Mill. But Lipkes' contribution here consists of his argument that Mill's views were influenced by a religious transition from the