



Salmon: From Wild Fish to
Genetically Modified Species

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Paul Burkett's Marx and Nature Fifteen Years After

By John Bellamy Foster

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This is the foreword to the second edition of Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (Haymarket, 2014).

Every book more than a few years old needs to be seen within the historical context in which it was written—works of social science most of all. Re-reading Paul Burkett's *Marx and Nature* today, nearly a decade and a half after its first publication, reminds me of how different in some respects the historical context was then, at the end of the twentieth century, from what we face today, in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Fifteen years ago the idea of a planetary ecological crisis still seemed fairly new and was being discussed by a relatively small number of environmentalists and scientists. Global warming was a world issue, but seldom hit the front page. Nowadays climate change is part of our everyday lives everywhere in the world—and history seems, if anything, to be accelerating in this respect. A decade and a half ago the contribution of Marx and Marxism to the understanding of ecology was seen in almost entirely negative terms, even by many self-styled ecosocialists. Today Marx's understanding of the ecological problem is being studied in universities worldwide and is inspiring ecological actions around the globe.

These changes are of course connected. As the environmental problems engendered by capitalist society have worsened, the necessary movements of ecological defense have radicalized and spread across the face of the planet. More comprehensive, dialectical explanations of the social destruction of the environment have thus been sought out, leading thinkers increasingly back to Marx. But today's widespread recognition of Marx's contribution to ecology can also be attributed to a considerable degree to Burkett's work and to that of a few other thinkers whom he influenced. In my own case the debt to Burkett is clear. As I wrote in the preface to my book *Marx's Ecology*, which appeared a year after *Marx and Nature*: "Paul Burkett's magisterial work *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (1999) constitutes not only part of the background against which this work was written, but also an essential complement to the analysis provided here. If I have sometimes neglected to

develop fully the political-economic aspects of Marx's ecology, it is because the existence of this work makes this unnecessary and redundant."¹

Burkett provided for the first time a completely unified reading of Marx's value analysis that integrated its natural-material or use-value components within a general value-form theory, bringing the ecological aspects of Marx's political economy alive as never before.² The result was to sharpen the understanding of Marx's dialectic of natural-social metabolism, enhancing our knowledge not only of the ecological dimensions of Marx's critique but also of his political economy as a whole.³

Marx and Nature had both a negative and a positive character and it was the negative aspect that stood out at first. Thus it was known at the outset more for its negative refutation of prevailing views than for its positive affirmation of Marx's ecological praxis. In the opening page of the book, Burkett referred to three common criticisms of Marx's approach to nature that he proceeded to refute in his book: (1) the claim that Marx primarily advanced productivist or "Promethean" notions aimed at the conquest of nature; (2) the view that Marx's political economy, and especially the labor theory of value, downgraded nature's contribution to production; and (3) the idea that Marx's analysis of the contradictions and crises of capitalism had nothing to do directly with the natural conditions of production.

In all of this Burkett was responding to what could be called first-stage ecosocialist analysis.⁴ Although contributions to ecological thought within the Marxist tradition have existed since the beginning—going back to Marx himself—ecosocialism, as a distinct tradition of inquiry, arose primarily in the late 1980s and early '90s under the hegemony of green theory (and in the context of the crisis of Marxism following the downfall of Soviet-type societies). The general approach adopted was one of grafting Marxian conceptions onto already existing green theory—or, in some cases, grafting green theory onto Marxism. Thinkers such as André Gorz, Ted Benton, James O'Connor, Alain Lipietz, and Joel Kovel, stood out in this respect for their important contributions to ecosocialist analysis.⁵ Nevertheless, the problem with all such approaches from a socialist perspective was that they did not constitute genuine critiques (the passing through and transcendence) of prevailing environmental thought, nor did they systematically explore the radical roots of Marxian theory itself in order to build on its own materialist and naturalist foundations. Rather they commonly adopted various ad hoc means of bridging the gap between the red and the green (such as O'Connor's

inspired introduction of the concepts of “conditions of production” and the “second contradiction of capitalism”).

Eventually, such an artificially contrived, hybrid methodology, which hardly challenged more conventional green thought, led to Marxism being seen by a number of first-stage ecosocialist thinkers as a mere hindrance to be discarded. Thus Gorz contended that Marx's approach to work, like Hegel's before him, was simply that of “the creative objectification of man's domination of nature.” Not surprisingly Gorz concluded: “As a system socialism is dead. As a movement and organized political force, it is on its last legs.... History and technical changes that are leading to the extinction, if not of the proletariat, then at least of the working class, have shown its philosophy of work and history to be misconceived.” Likewise in an article that appeared in O'Connor's journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism* only a year after the publication of Burkett's book, Lipietz claimed that Marx had fallen prey to “the Biblico-Cartesian ideology of the conquest of nature.” Marx, Lipietz asserted, had underestimated “the irreducible character of...external constraints (ecological constraints, to be exact)” to production and had thus failed to encompass the holism required by an ecological perspective. Hence, “the intellectual scaffolding of the Marxist paradigm, along with the key solutions it suggests, must be jettisoned.”⁶

Burkett's *Marx and Nature* was written as a refutation of such first-stage ecosocialist views by means of a reconstruction and reaffirmation of Marx's own critical-ecological outlook. *Marx and Nature* thus represented the rise of a second stage of ecosocialist analysis which sought to go back to Marx and to uncover his *materialist conception of nature* as an essential counterpart to his materialist conception of history. The object was to transcend first-stage ecosocialism, as well as the limitations of existing green theory, with its overly spiritualistic, idealistic, and moralistic emphases, as a first step in the development of a more thoroughgoing ecological Marxism.

Behind the dispute between first-stage and second-stage ecosocialism was in fact a fundamental disagreement about the nature of socialism. First-stage ecosocialists argued that socialism was marred (some said irretrievably) in Marx's own work by his narrow productivism. A few went so far, as we have seen, to pronounce socialism dead. In this view ecosocialism was the heir apparent to socialism. In contrast, second-stage ecosocialists, beginning with Burkett, conceived ecosocialism not as a successor to Marxism but as a deeper form of ecological praxis arising out of the materialist foundations of classical Marxism. To the extent that the terms “ecological socialism” or “ecological

Marxism" were used by second-stage ecosocialists, they did not refer to a break with Marxian theory and practice, but represented a reinvigoration of its classical-materialist perspective. As Raymond Williams stated, the problem of our society is not that we are materialist, but that we are "not materialist enough" – in the use-value sense.⁷

Such differences in perspective naturally gave rise to considerable misunderstandings in the literature. For example, Kovel, who was to succeed O'Connor as editor-in-chief of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, observed in his book, *The Enemy of Nature* (2002):

An opposing point of view [to those who condemned Marx outright as anti-ecological], recently argued by Marxists such as John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, energetically contests the indictment, and holds that Marx, far from being Promethean, was a main originator of the ecological world-view. Building their argument from Marx's materialist foundations, his scientific affinity with Darwin, and his conception of the "metabolic rift" between humanity and nature, Foster and Burkett consider the original Marxian canon as the true and sufficient guide to save nature from capitalism....

A close reading will show Marx to be no Promethean. But he was no god of any kind, either.... Marxism today can have no greater goal than the criticism of Marx in the light of that history to which he had not been exposed, namely, of the ecological crisis.

Here it needs to be observed that...there remains in his [Marx's] work a foreshortening of the intrinsic value of nature. Yes, humanity is part of nature for Marx. But it is the active part, the part that makes things happen, while nature becomes that which is acted upon.... In Marx, nature is, so to speak, subjected to labour from the start. This side of things may be inferred from his conception of labour, which involves an entirely *active* relationship to what has become a kind of natural substratum.⁸

For Kovel, "Socialism, though ready to entertain that capital is nature's enemy, is less sure about being nature's friend." Such views led him to present ecosocialism as the historical answer to the serious defects of Marxism in this respect.⁹

Yet to contend that Burkett and I view "the original Marxian canon" as a "true and sufficient guide to saving nature from capitalism" is to attribute to us an absolute absurdity. No rational individual could believe that Marx's nineteenth-century analysis, notwithstanding all its brilliance, constitutes a "sufficient guide" to solving the global ecological crisis in an age of planetary climate change, ocean acidification, and fracking. Naturally, whatever

methodological insights are to be derived from Marx's dialectic with respect to the ecological and social critique of capitalism—and as Lukács said regarding Marxism, “orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*”—have to be synthesized with a vast body of historical and scientific knowledge that has arisen subsequently, and with the conditions of contemporary social praxis.¹⁰

But what about Kovel's criticisms of Marx himself in relation to ecology? Was Marx seriously ignorant with respect to ecological crisis? Was nature, in his analysis, properly conceived as a mere external object to be “subjected” by labor? Did he view nature as “passive” and inert, a mere “natural substratum”?

Recent scholarship, beginning with *Marx and Nature* itself, has demonstrated the error of contending that Marx was unaware of the major ecological crises in his time, or that he failed to learn from them—even if he could not possibly foresee the planetary ecological rift of today.¹¹ The idea that Marx saw nature as “passive” conflicts with his conception of nature as evolutionary and with the whole dialectical frame of his thought, which led him to point to what he called “the universal metabolism of nature.”¹² Indeed, for Marx, the labor process, far from being viewed as a mere mechanistic force for the subjection of nature, was defined *in its essence* (as distinct from the alienated conditions of capitalist society) as “the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [*Stoffwechsel*] between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence.”¹³

Reading *Marx and Nature* one cannot fail to be impressed by the extent to which Marx's critique of political economy, as described by Burkett, incorporated the alienation of nature as an essential component of the critique of capital—so much so that this is embodied in the deep structure of Marx's value analysis. It was this that led Marx: (1) to point out that capitalism undermined “the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker,”¹⁴ (2) to stress the contradiction between use value and exchange value, (3) to emphasize that human beings were themselves a part of nature, (4) to describe the labor and production process as part of the “universal metabolic process,”¹⁵ and (5) to define socialism as the rational regulation by the associated producers of the metabolism between humanity and nature. According to Marx, no one, not all the people of the world put together, owned the earth; they held it only in usufruct as “good heads of the household,” and were meant to pass it on in improved condition to future generations.¹⁶

Today it is possible to say that second-stage ecosocialism decisively won the great debate over the ecological significance of Marx and Engels's works. Nearly a decade and half after the first publication of Burkett's *Marx and Nature* the abundant evidence of the deep and pervasive ecological critique embedded in Marx's work is now so well recognized that much of the debate in this respect is over. Ecological notions, attributable to Marx, such as the metabolic rift and the natural-material basis of use value, have now entered into the basic conceptions of ecological movements themselves.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the fact that the basic analysis of *Marx and Nature* has now been widely affirmed by scholars does not make Burkett's work any less valuable to us today. Nor does it make it less important to continue to examine the works of Marx himself—or those of subsequent Marxists who can be said to have contributed to ecological thought. What it does suggest is that the significance of Burkett's *Marx and Nature*, fifteen years after its first appearance, lies less in its *negative critique* of first-stage ecosocialism than its *positive contribution* to the urgent task of developing a socialist alternative to capitalism's destructive ecology. The focus has thus shifted to what can be considered a third stage of ecosocialism research (the logical outgrowth of the second) in which the goal is to employ the ecological foundations of classical Marxian thought to confront present-day capitalism and the planetary ecological crisis that it has engendered—together with the ruling forms of ideology that block the development of a genuine alternative.

Again Burkett led the way. Building on the foundational view established in *Marx and Nature*, he went on to develop a Marxian critique of existing ecological economics, with the goal of developing a distinctly Marxian ecological economics more equipped to address the environmental contradictions of our time. In 2006 he published his masterwork in this realm, *Marxism and Ecological Economics: Toward a Red and Green Political Economy*. This critique, aimed at necoclassical economics—together with those forms of environmental (or ecological) economics insufficiently opposed to the former—was developed with regard to four central issues: "(1) the relations between nature and *economic value*; (2) the treatment of *nature as capital*; (3) the significance of the *entropy law* for economic systems; (4) the concept of *sustainable development*."¹⁸ In all of this Burkett extended the deep understanding of classical Marxian insights already evident in *Marx and Nature* in order to critique and transform ecological economics in a more radical and uncompromising direction—in relation to both society and nature. His landmark article on "Marx's Vision of Sustainable Human Development," in the October 2005 issue of *Monthly Review*, gave perhaps the

most comprehensive view of Marx's larger ecological conception of socialism, conceived in terms of a world of substantive equality and ecological sustainability.¹⁹

It is a testimony to the power of Burkett's contribution that others are now attempting to follow in his footsteps, extending Marx's socio-ecological dialectic and ecological-value analysis to the scrutiny of today's environmental problems.²⁰ We live in a time of great ecological peril, but we are also seeing a great flowering of socialist ecology and of more radical forms of environmental practice, particularly in the global South.²¹ Burkett's work has made possible a kind of spiraling movement in which critics of the status quo are able to move back to Marx's radical-materialist critique and then move forward again, newly inspired, to engage in revolutionary ecological and social praxis in the present. Mainstream environmentalism only describes the ecological crisis engendered by today's society; the point is to transcend it.

Notes

1. John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), ix. Burkett and I corresponded and inspired each other throughout the 1990s. While he was developing Marx's ecological-value analysis I was working on the concept of metabolic rift. See John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (September 1999): 366-405. In both areas our work overlapped.
2. It is a testimony to the power of Burkett's analysis that it gave centrality to the concept of value form, a category that has come to be regarded as increasingly central to the interpretation of Marx's value analysis. Part of this was due to the influence of I.I. Rubin's work on Burkett's thinking as well as Burkett's own deep appreciation of the logic of Marx's analysis. On this see Burkett, *Marx and Nature*, chapter 3; also I.I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1972), 107-23; Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's 'Capital'* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 52-64.
3. Here it should be mentioned that a brilliant precursor of Burkett's analysis of the ecological implications of Marx's value analysis was to be found in Elmar Altvater, *The Future of Money* (London: Verso, 1993). Altvater, however, stopped short of a systematic development of Marx's analysis in this area.
4. The discussion of first-stage and second-stage ecosocialism in this and the following paragraphs draws on John Bellamy Foster, "Environmental Politics: Analyses and Alternatives" (a review), *Historical Materialism* 8

- (Summer 2001): 461–77. See also Paul Burkett, “Two Stages of Ecosocialism?: Implications of Some Neglected Analyses of Ecological Conflict and Crisis,” *International Journal of Political Economy* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 23–45.
5. See André Gorz, *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* (London: Verso, 1994); Ted Benton, “Marxism and Natural Limits,” *New Left Review* 178 (November–December 1989): 51–86; James O’Connor, *Natural Relations* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998); Alain Lipietz, “Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 11 (2000): 69–85; Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature* (London: Zed, 2002).
 6. Gorz, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Ecology*, vii, 29; Lipietz, “Political Ecology and the Future of Marxism,” 74–75.
 7. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 185, 106–14.
 8. ↪Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature*, 210–11.
 9. ↪Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature*, ix. In a similar way, *An Ecosocialist Manifesto*, authored by Kovel and Michael Löwy in 2001, sees ecosocialism as the heir to what it calls “first-epoch socialism,” <http://iefd.org>.
 10. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 1.
 11. In addition to Burkett’s *Marx and Nature*, particularly chapter 9, see Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 141–77, and John Bellamy Foster, “Capitalism and the Accumulation of Catastrophe,” *Monthly Review* 63, no. 7 (December 2011): 1–17.
 12. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers 1975), vol. 30, 63. The interpretation of Marx’s materialism offered by Sebastiano Timpanaro that suggested that Marx saw nature as “passive” and denied its active principle was strongly criticized in Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 258.
 13. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 290.
 14. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 638.
 15. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 30, 63.
 16. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 911, 959.
 17. See, for example, Hanna Wittman, “Reworking the Metabolic Rift: La Via Campesina, Agrarian Citizenship, and Food Sovereignty,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 4 (October 2009): 805–26.
 18. Paul Burkett, *Marxism and Ecological Economics: Toward a Red and Green Economy* (Chicago: Haymarket, [2006] 2009), vii.

19. Paul Burkett, "Marx's Vision of Sustainable Human Development," *Monthly Review* 57, no. 5 (October 2005): 34–62.
20. See, for example, Jason W. Moore, "Transcending the Metabolic Rift," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 1 (2011): 1–46; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); John Bellamy Foster, "The Ecology of Marxian Political Economy," *Monthly Review* 63, no. 4 (September 2011): 1–16; Ariel Salleh, "From Metabolic Rift to 'Metabolic Value,'" *Organization and Environment* 23, no. 2 (2010): 205–19; and Chris Williams, *Ecology and Socialism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2010).
21. A high point here was the 2010 *Peoples' Agreement* in Bolivia, reprinted in Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 145–58.

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