MARX AND THE ECO-LOGIC OF CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT

Devan Pillay
Department of Sociology
University of the Witwatersrand
The problem laid bare

- The global crisis is a poly-crisis, with intertwined socioeconomic and ecological dimensions.

- Its origins lie not in the 1970s neo-liberal counter-revolution, but in the historical trajectory of global capitalism.

- Can a Green New Deal (or global/national social democracy), which includes a role for the market under state/global regulation and standards, offer a solution?

- Or is sustainable human development (and with it ‘decent work’ and a ‘decent life’) impossible for all under capitalism?
Different approaches to Marx and Ecology

a) Marx was pro-technology and anti-ecological (indistinguishable from Soviet practice);

OR

b) Marx had moments of ecological insight, but that was minor compared to his pro-technology, pro-growth stance;

OR

c) at best Marx had a theory about ecological degradation in agriculture – but this was separate from his core social analysis;

OR

d) Marx had a systemic approach to nature and to environmental degradation (Foster, Burkett)
“From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth, they are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as boni patres familias [good heads of households]” (Capital, Vol 3)
Misunderstandings about Marx and Ecology

- ‘Metabolic rift’ between town and country, humans and nature
- Not idiocy of rural life (Communist Manifesto) but isolation of rural life (mis-translation says Foster)
  - same period Marx had high praise for peasant struggles
- Not domination of nature in hard sense, but mastery in accordance with nature’s laws.
  - Neither anthropocentric (Humans above all else)
  - NOR eco-centric (Nature above all else)
  - BUT dialectical interaction between Humans and Nature
- Rooted on Darwin’s theory of evolution
Early Marxists took up ecological issues (Lenin, Luxembourg, Bukharin, early Soviet scientists)

Stalin obliterated ecological movement

Blind pursuit of industrial development at all costs (PRODUCTION TREADMILL – state capitalism)

Celebrated by Soviet-inclined Marxists in race with capitalist West

But Western Marxism’s aversion to natural sciences (and positivism) also led to neglect of Marx’s ecology
  • Exceptions British Marxism (esp like Caudwell)

Revival only from 1970s (and particularly Burkett and Foster in 1990s)
Weakness in Marx’s ecology

- Expected imminent socialist revolution
- Focussed more on exploitation of Labour
- Capitalist sows seeds of own destruction (Labour movement)
- Devoted more attention to ecology in post-capitalist society (Sustainable human development)
- But now clear that Nature also be gravedigger of capitalism (indeed, possibly more so that Labour)
  - Depletion of fossil fuels that drove industrialisation
  - Climate change
  - Destruction of eco-systems; desertification; tropical forests; etc
The Eco-logic of fossil capitalist development

- Accumulation for the sake of accumulation (incessant growth/consumption)
- Accumulation by dispossession (of peoples; of the commons e.g. privatisation)
- Enclave development (core-periphery)
- “Globalisation” – enlarged periphery in Core;
  - Enlarged core within Periphery
  - Exceptions: East Asia
Affluenza and the rise of the *Americum* (T. Friedman)

- “Too many Americans”
- Consumption of rising middle classes unsustainable
- Need 2-3 more planets
- Crisis of ‘modernisation’
- “*eco-logic of capitalism* [is] an important, if not the most important, *restraint on growth*” (my emphasis).
Friedman (and Obama’s) “Green revolution”

- T. FRIEDMAN: Innovation only possible through state intervention (Obama agenda)
  - Taxes, regulations, standards, subsidies etc
  - Get “prices right” to spur on innovation in renewable technologies
    - Increased efficiency of energy use
    - Clean coal; clean nuclear power
  - ‘Decoupling’: continue economic growth without depleting resource base
Critique of ‘decoupling’ thesis

- BUT: efficiency just leads to more production (Foster)
  - Industrial treadmill integral part of capitalism
  - Coal sequestration unproven technology (false promise)
  - Nuclear power also carbon intensive and dangerous waste
  - Not eliminate coal-fired power stations in foreseeable future

- Shift of social priorities impossible with vested interests
  - restricted parameters of technological use (market-driven)
  - not driven by needs of society and ecology (nature)
Green New Deal?

- New Deal (or Social Democracy) only benefitted tiny minority of world’s population (in SA white minority)

- Based on accumulation (growth) imperative (wealth/possession for some, poverty/dispossession for majority)

- Can all boats rise in sea of ‘development’?
  - globalising markets (IMF, WTO, World Bank) and
  - A few global/national regulations and standards (T. Friedman, Stiglitz)?

- Or will GND at best be new form of enclivity?
  - Green islands surrounded by seas of pollution, poverty and plundered communities?
  - Underpinned by global hegemony/military domination?
Sustainable Human Development (Evo Morales)

- Experiments in Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Kerala (India). Evo Morales:
  - “As Long as we do not change the capitalist system for a system based on complementarity, solidarity, and harmony between the people and nature, the measures that we adopt will be palliatives that will [be] limited and precarious in character. For us, what has failed is the model of “living better” (than others), of unlimited development, industrialisation without frontiers, of modernity that deprecates history, of increasing accumulation of goods at the expense of others and nature. For that reason we promote the idea of Living Well, in harmony with other human beings and with our Mother Earth” (quoted in Foster, JB (2009)).
Eco-socialist economics

- Solidarity social economies
  - Subordinate ‘economics’ to society
  - ‘Sufficiency’ vs incessant ‘growth’
    - Steady state economies (esp for developed countries)
    - Co-operatives (production, sales etc)
    - Local economies (reduce food miles)
    - Renewable energy
    - Regional trade (ALBA model based on solidarity, not competition)
    - Shared technology, innovation (e.g. internet, copyleft)
- Reduce hours of formal work; increase social wage (greater ‘leisure’ time to pursue socially reproductive, personally creative activities)
Eco-socialist democracy

- Participatory democracy
- Neither state-centric nor market-centric but society-centric
  - Maximum transparency of decision-making
  - Participatory budgeting at local level
  - Mobilised/institutionalised counter-power (keep leaders on short leash)
  - Media diversity, access to information and freedom of expression (minimum state, market influence)
- Global regulations and standards
  - Minimise race to bottom (dictatorship of capital)
  - Maximise race to top (democracy of humanity, in harmony with nature)