


Green Views of Marx: Reinterpreting, Revising, Rejecting, Transcending

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Abstract

Is Marxist theory relevant or conducive to environmental political thought? This article considers responses to this question and the debate regarding possibilities of a red/green coalition through examination of four green theorists who represent positions of theoretical and historical significance: first, the argument that an enlightened reinterpretation of Marx reveals him to be an inherently ecological thinker; second, the belief that Marxist thought holds significant value for environmental theory but that crucial weaknesses demand essential revision; third, the rejection of Marx and his political theory as antagonistic to environmental protection; and, finally, social ecology's use of dialectical naturalism to transcend Marx's failings.

Keywords

environmentalism, green theory, Marx, social ecology

The environmental movement has used a range of theoretical and activist challenges: protests against industrial practices leading to climate change, defiance of consumer culture, objections to local and global cases of environmental injustice, disobedience of laws deemed to be environmentally unfriendly. Resistance has been only part of the green movement's story; environmentalists, like proponents of any social movement, must argue for new habits and institutions at the same time they work to defeat the old. Still, not surprisingly, green thinkers have devoted a large proportion of their energy to confrontations with orthodox theories and practices.

As a result, a series of ongoing challenges to the Western canon of political theory constituted a significant part of that adversarial project during the rise and consolidation of the 20th-century environmental movement. Old masters came under scrutiny according to a new set of standards: Were Plato and Aristotle early greens (Westra & Robinson, 1997)? Was Heidegger a forerunner of deep ecology (Zimmerman, 1993)? Is it time to pull environmental thinkers, such as Thoreau, to the forefront of political theory (Bennett, 1994)? Of these early critical reconsiderations, dominant understandings of Karl Marx prompted one of the most voluminous and vociferous sets of arguments from the mainstream environmental and radical ecology movements. Backers and attackers, proponents and protesters published a profuse literature of books and journal articles on the urgent need for—or impossibilities of—a red/green coalition. This article is designed to summarize, explain, and evaluate key aspects of this literature through an examination of several significant theoretical analyses of Marx's environmental theory.

Since the 1970s, provocative critiques of Marxist thought by mainstream environmentalists, biocentrists, survivalists,

and other factions of the ecological spectrum have demanded reconsiderations of Marx and his theory of the relationship between humans and their environment. This analysis has been reciprocal rather than one-sided; many veteran leftists responded to these challenges by taking Marx back to the theoretical drawing board and examining the environmental implications of Marx's writings on capitalism, alienation, and technology. Furthermore, while some Marxists wholly rejected the relevance of the environmental movement and some greens summarily rejected Marx as a theoretical source, many on each side saw themselves as engaged in an inter-linked project of Marxist ecology, eco-Marxism, ecosocialism, or red/green-left/green politics, depending on one's favored term. From the red side of the potential coalition, Marxist thinkers generally fell into three categories when they were challenged to integrate Marx and environmental theory, as described by Reiner Grundmann (1991b): the first group included adherents of Marxist orthodoxy who spurned efforts to construct an environmental coalition; the second included Marxist dissidents who claimed that central principles of Marx's theory were ecologically untenable and then moved to the green side of the debate; the third group included thinkers who embraced the environmental project but found all necessary answers readily available within Marxist thought. This last position, Grundmann (1991a) noted, "amounts to wishful thinking" (p. 103). While his own analysis found that Marx's theory has much to offer "once

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the strait-jacket of an orthodox interpretation [is] stripped off" (Grundmann, 1991b, p. 284), Grundmann (1991b) cautioned that self-delusion must be avoided by recognizing without regrets that "Marx was no ecologist, even if he *could* have been one" (p. 6).

Similar divisions marked the green side of the debate. Rather than examining how the environmental movement was relevant to Marxist thought, as was the case for those who began from the Marxist position, the question for green theorists was whether Marx's writings were relevant to environmental political theory. Again, several general camps emerged regarding Marx's affinity to green theory. Some analysts found Marx to be a seminal environmentalist whose theories of historical materialism, commodification, and alienation provide what is needed to analyze contemporary ecological problems. According to these writers, the solutions could be found through a new, more accurate understanding of Marx through enlightened reinterpretation (Burkett, 1999; Parsons, 1977; Vaillancourt, 1996; Vogel, 1988). Not surprisingly, these defenders of Marxist ecology tended to concentrate on Marx's earlier writings, which took a more interdependent view of humans' relationship with nature. A second group was much tougher on Marx, arguing that although his political economy was crucial in certain ways, it also contained significant flaws by way of cultural bias, theoretical omissions, or logical errors. This group, which yielded a large output of astute and articulate writing (Benton, 1989, 1992; Luke, 1999; O'Connor, 1998; Pepper, 1993; Redclift, 1985), tried to move Marxist thought to a higher level of theory and practice through ecological revision. However, members of a third class of green theorists judged these first two groups as remaining dangerously mired within the modern Promethean mission of controlling nature—a mission, they argued, in which Marx was still thoroughly engaged. These writers, who tended to focus their critiques on Marx's later works, insisted that he could not stand as an environmental defender and must be rejected rather than revised or reinterpreted (Eckersley, 1992; Henderson, 1989; Routley, 1981). As a result, they argued, the environmental movement must pursue a new theoretical foundation rather than a red/green coalition or eco-Marxist rectification. A fourth position, held by Murray Bookchin (1988, 1990, 1991, 1996), took a still different route, arguing for a dialectical naturalism that adopts, disowns, and transcends various aspects of Marx's theory.

The literature for these positions within green political thought has been rich and the debate remains unsettled. As a means of identifying and explaining the core arguments within each of these responses, this article provides a primer of green approaches through examination of four landmark contributors who set the stage for ecological considerations of Marx. Howard L. Parson's (1977) book *Marx and Engels on Ecology* laid out the representative arguments for an enlightened reinterpretation, Ted Benton's (1989) *Marxism and Natural Limits* voiced the call for revision, and Val Routley

(later Plumwood) argued that Marxist thought must be rejected by environmental theorists in her oft-cited article in *Environmental Ethics* (Routley, 1981). Murray Bookchin's critical response to Marx demands additional attention. His dialectical approach within the project of social ecology would appear to bring him close to Marxist theory, yet his goal of libertarian municipalism and focus on hierarchical social relations as the root of ecological problems also yielded a strident critique of Marx's broader mission. Bookchin pointed to social ecology's philosophy of dialectical naturalism as an "ecologized" approach that transcended Marx's methodical and theoretical errors, rejected capitalism's instrumental reasoning, and shunned "sloppy" ecologists' turn to anti-rationalism and mysticism. Following a survey of divergent ecological analyses by Parsons, Benton, and Plumwood, therefore, I turn to an examination of Bookchin's response to Marx through the process of dialectical naturalism.

Reinterpreting Marx: Parsons and Marx and Engels on Ecology

For Howard L. Parsons, an investigation into the writings of Marx and Engels in search of ecological meaning was anything but "a trivial form of scholarship and an example of special pleading." On the contrary, as he wrote in his influential volume of original analysis and compilations from those works, "Marx and Engels had an understanding of an approach to ecology before the German zoologist, Ernst Haeckel, coined the term *Oekologie* in 1869, and long before the current 'ecological crisis' and 'energy crisis'" (Parsons, 1977, p. xi). Parsons clearly did not see himself as a Marxist in ecological masquerade who was attempting to deflect a new set of annoying criticisms. Instead, he presented himself as a full-fledged environmental thinker who regarded the ecological movement as a crucial and integral part of the socialist struggle.

It was no accident, Parsons (1977) wrote, that the modern conception of nature based on dialectics and ecology arose during Marx's era, responding to the scientific and historical unveiling of "the interactive, evolutionary, and transformative character of nature and society" (p. 4). Once we understand the dialectical method, according to Parsons, we also will know the inherent link between ecological and dialectical thought:

[E]cology as a specific science of ecosystems displays the principles of the general science of nature, or dialectics. For dialectics as a science of systems generally is concerned with the interactions of two or more living or nonliving systems with one another and with their environment. Ecology is the application of dialectics to living systems, and dialectics is the generalization of the method of ecology from living systems to all systems. (p. 7)

As a result, Parsons (1977) argued, a new understanding of Marx's works quickly reveals a "dialectical, ecological

standpoint.” Humans’ physical and spiritual lives are inseparable from nature (man’s “inorganic body”) because nature cannot be separated from itself and because humans are part of nature, as Marx wrote in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. With no doubt as to his intended answer, Parsons rhetorically asked, “Has there been a better, more succinct, ecological statement of man’s place in nature than this?” (p. 10). Marx’s sensitivity to ecological laws and our violation of those laws is evident, he wrote, citing passages in *Capital Vol. 3* regarding waste and squandering of the soil. Through these writings, according to Parsons, “the true humanist turns out to be the true naturalist, and the true radical to be the true conservative” (p. 19).

An extensive part of Parsons’ (1977) project was an unsuccessful attempt to turn aside four common criticisms from ecologists who were less sympathetic to green readings of Marx and Engels. First, he argued, Marx did not pit man against nature as alleged. Dialectical materialism affirms both opposition and unity of humans and nature, according to Parsons, and any opposition to nature in the sense of ecological destructiveness “is by definition impossible in true Marxism” (p. 43). On this count, he wrote, Marx stands well ahead of those ecologists who paradoxically claim to love nature but hate humanity: “It was not that Marx and Engels did not love nature; it was that they loved both it and mankind” (p. 41). Parsons then took on the charge that Marx was anthropocentric and thus denied the values of nonhuman nature. Here Parsons returned to the inseparability of humans and nature and again embraced a departure from those green theorists who had purveyed the “unrealistic” argument that concerns about nature can be addressed independently of concerns about humans. Marx, quite rightly, rejected this unrealism and emphasized human needs, so “if the assumption of the criticism is that Marxism has this emphasis, the assumption is correct” (p. 45). This does not make Marx unecological, Parsons maintained, but “at the very worst,” may leave some open questions regarding the issue of values in nature: “In my own reading of these writings there is nothing that finally forecloses the issue, in spite of what defenders or attackers of Marx and Engels may say” (p. 50).

In similar fashion, Parsons (1977) sought ways to refute a third criticism alleging that Marx had overemphasized conflicts in nature and overlooked the presence of harmony. This charge cannot be upheld, Parsons argued, as cooperation is inherent in Marx’s conception of nature. Because humans and nature are inextricably linked, humans cannot be changed or fulfilled without also changing and fulfilling nature. Humans therefore share needs with other peoples and other nonhuman animals, and “if man is a human animal, as Marxism maintains, man’s needs require the full support of both society and nature” (p. 57). Finally, a fourth criticism offered by ecologists came under Parsons’ scrutiny. According to Parsons, it is untrue that Marx denied basic human values, but instead he worked to liberate humanity from alienation within society and nature—itsself an

ecological movement. “The inevitable pathway to this new ecological system is the transformation of capitalism into socialism under the leadership of a proletarian political movement” (p. 67).

Through this ecological interpretation of Marx’s writings, Parsons engaged in twin projects. First, he hoped to refute the critiques offered by both Marxists and non-Marxists and allow Marxist theory to claim the primary analytic window for the ecological movement. Second, Parsons relentlessly worked toward a conclusion he hoped was inescapable: that Marxist theory not only is ecologically friendly in the sense that it can be turned toward environmental issues but, more importantly, that it inherently and unavoidably leads to the verdict that ecological problems are inseparable from issues of political economy and class. The urgent need facing the environmental movement was not rejection of Marxist theory and adoption of a new political philosophy, according to Parsons, but rather recapture of the comprehensive understanding of ecological issues contained within Marx’s dialectical materialism.

His call for this recapturing of Marx did not go unheard; reflections of Parsons’ sympathetic reinterpretation of Marx are found in more recent analyses, particularly in the work of John Bellamy Foster (Foster et al., 2010) and Paul Burkett (2006). Ultimately, however, Parsons’ presentation of Marx failed in its attempt to revitalize Marx as an early green thinker and, instead, has been viewed as “anachronistic in the worst sense” through Parsons’ ploy of reinvention (Humphrey, 2002, p. 142).

Revising Marx: Benton and Marxism and Natural Limits

Many other writers have been considerably less willing than Parsons to give Marx credit for an ecological vision. These theorists, including both Marxists and non-Marxists, have regarded Marx’s work as a valuable and, for some, a crucial part of the ecological quest for solutions, but they have argued for much more than a selective and ecologically sympathetic reinterpretation. Instead, they have proposed critical revisions of Marx’s writings to reconstruct historical materialism on an ecological level. One influential revisionist is Ted Benton (1989, 1992, 1993, 1996), who has argued that Marxist theory as it stands is unable to conceptualize the ecological limits of humans’ relation with nature. Because Marx feared an opening for the conservative natural-limits argument of Thomas Robert Malthus, according to Benton, he provided an unfinished critique of classical political economy, resulting in “a series of related confections, imprecisions and lacunae.” The resolution of this problem is not avoidance or rejection of Marx, Benton (1989) wrote, but rather a project of correction, as “there is much in the corpus of Marxist historical materialism which is readily compatible with an ecological perspective” (p. 63). Along with others, Benton (1996) has sought “to build from a critical revision of

the Marxist classics towards an ecologically informed historical materialism” (p. 103).

For Benton, this project of correction must produce, first, a retheorization of the concept of labor process, which Marx defined as the eternal condition of human existence as imposed by our natural environment, and second, the concept of mode of production. In his writings, Marx viewed the labor process as transformative, consisting of a raw material turned into a use value through human labor and the utilization of other raw materials and instruments of labor. Benton was unwilling to accept this definition, however, arguing that Marx thus overgeneralizes all labor processes as fitting the productive model. Some practices, such as raising crops or livestock, cannot be incorporated within that model, he argued, and the transformative aspect of these “eco-regulatory” practices is achieved not through human labor but by nature’s organic mechanisms. Rather than transforming, human labor in eco-regulatory practices works to sustain, regulate, and reproduce, in Benton’s view, and the Marxist “subject of labor” is not the raw material (i.e., the wheat seed or calf) but the ecological conditions in which that material grows and matures. Human labor cannot be regarded as the transformative tool for this category of practice, according to Benton (1989), due to the range of elements that are “relatively impervious to intentional manipulation, and in some respects they are absolutely non-manipulable” (p. 68).

Furthermore, Benton (1989) argued, Marx’s account of the labor process failed with respect to labor processes that can be assimilated within the productive model. Even here, Marx’s conception “is shown to exaggerate their potentially transformative character, whilst under-theorizing or occluding the various respects in which they are subject to naturally given and/or relatively non-manipulable conditions and limits” (p. 73). Such weaknesses in Marx’s theory are not merely discrete errors, according to Benton, but “are coherent with significant strands in the wider theoretical perspectives of Marx and Engels, and they have a certain plausibility given the historical location of their thinking” (p. 74). Marx also held an optimistic view about the emancipation of man by becoming master of both his social organization and nature, Benton argued, suggesting “an underlying antagonism between human purposes and nature: either we control nature, or it controls us! No room, apparently, for symbiosis, peaceful co-existence, mutual indifference or other imaginable metaphors for this relationship” (p. 75).

If Marx is indeed a purveyor of a Promethean project of nature’s dominion, contrary to Parsons’ vision of Marx as an early ecologist, must we then reject Marxist theory altogether? Certainly not, Benton (1989) argued, for “now we have reached the point in the argument where we can begin to see the potential *fruitfulness* of Marx’s critical account of capitalist accumulation, once defects in his concept of the labour-process are corrected” (p. 77, italics in original). We must find the path that “avoids both the Scylla of epistemic conservatism and the Charybdis of ‘social-constructionist’ utopianism,” he

warned, and offered three means by which to do so. First, through a re-conceptualization of the labor processes, we must recognize that the interrelations between humans and nature enable as well as limit. While “naturally given processes, mechanisms and conditions *make possible* human need-meeting practices which otherwise could not occur,” that power of possibility, “conferred on human agents by a specific social relation to a natural condition or mechanism, will also be bounded in its scope by that self-same relation” (p. 78, italics in original). Second, in contrast to Malthusian natural-limits conservatism, we must recognize that limits are contextual within specific relations between society and nature; “what constitutes a genuine natural limit for one such form of nature/society articulation may *not* constitute a limit for another” (p. 79, italics in original). Limits to growth thus should not be seen as either social-limits or natural-limits *simpliciter*, Benton (1992) argued, but rather as effects of particular combinations of social and natural forces (p. 58). For Benton, recognition of these contextual and interdependent limits through retheorization of the labor process returns Marxist theory to a central position in the analysis of society/nature (and therefore ecological) relations and furthers arguments for the need for transforming existing relations.

In contrast to the comparatively short-lived influence of Parsons’ reinterpretation model, Benton’s call for a revision of Marx has demonstrated significant staying power. In a volume of essays in his honor (Moog & Stones, 2009), Sandra Moog provides a testament to Benton’s leading role within ecosocialist theory when she compares Benton’s analysis of culture/nature dualism to other approaches, such as those of radical ecologists and Bruno Latour (2004). Moog (2009) firmly concludes that Benton has provided “a fundamentally more coherent approach to practical ecological politics” (p. 40).

Rejecting Marx: Routley/Plumwood and “On Karl Marx as an environmental hero”

Both Marx’s concept of transformation and the need to recognize natural limits also play central roles in Val Plumwood’s assessment of Marx, but this green theorist was far less amenable than Benton to correcting flaws and retaining the rest. Plumwood, writing under her earlier surname of Routley (1981), set out to scrutinize characterizations of Marx as “an environmental hero” and quickly found him falling irreparably short of the mark. The article in which she presented her arguments was relatively brief, in response to a revisionist presentation by Donald C. Lee (1980), but during this period, Plumwood presented the most significant challenges to Marx from the ecocentric end of the spectrum of environmental theory. She found no fault with Marx’s anti-capitalist stand nor with Lee’s extrapolation that capitalism is largely responsible for contemporary ecological crises, but she argued that the project is not merely one of manipulating Marxist principles to fit new ecological ideas:

[I]t would be unfortunate if the attempt to work out an alternative nature ethic for a non-capitalist society had to take the form of revamping Marx and of merely reinterpreting the radically unsatisfactory material he provides. Those who work for an environmentally conscious non-capitalist society need to go beyond Marx and draw on a broader range of philosophical, ethical, and socialist traditions (including the ethical traditions of some of the “primitive” societies Marxists tend to see as so backward), for Marx’s views on nature, and associated central parts of this theory, belong to the past, and are far too close to those which lie at the root of many of our troubles. (p. 244)

The foundational problem, according to Plumwood, lies in Marx’s concept of the relationship between humans and nature. Marx’s declaration of unity between humans and nature, so applauded by Parsons and seen as theoretically salvageable by Benton, is no more than a declaration of man creating nature through transformation that destroys what is nonhuman or “the other” and replaces it with a humanized version, Plumwood argued. Unity and harmony are achieved only because nature no longer has an independent identity, meaning that Marx’s concept of nature as man’s “inorganic body” has not satisfied a central criterion of dialectical synthesis (p. 238). Attempts by Marxist eco-revisionists have failed, and will continue to fail, Plumwood charged, due to the logical impossibility of presenting Marxist theory in an ecological light. If Marx is portrayed as ecologically friendly, presentation of his doctrines must be obscure; if his doctrines are presented clearly, the portrayal must be ecologically unfavorable (p. 239).

Plumwood went on to delineate several specific ways in which Marx had gone wrong. First, she pointed out, Marx ousted God from Hegel’s system of order and gave humans that role of creation and expression, a move that put Marxist theory “on a head-on collision course with any attempt to develop a genuine and deep environmental consciousness” (p. 241). As a result, the ecology movement must dedicate itself to rejecting this transposition:

The development of environmental consciousness is in large part a process of discarding this Enlightenment legacy, of upsetting the human hubris which resulted from it and restoring a sense of the *limitation* of human powers and human ability to understand, interfere with, and manipulate a larger natural order. (p. 240, italics in original)

In addition, Plumwood argued, Marx’s view of capitalism as a necessary stage in human development collapses once we reject his argument that we must dominate nature to become fully human. Our need to acquire power over nature played a central role in Marx’s theory of history, explaining the development of classes and the final abolition of classes through technological progress, but when the principle of nature-transformation has been cast off, so is much of the rest of Marxist theory (p. 241). Plumwood also argued that Marx’s ill-founded view of animals as inferior to humans

must give way to research indicating that many animals have consciousness and are capable of activities that humans cannot reproduce. Finally, according to Plumwood, Marx’s position on energy use and minimization of life-sustaining labor was neither plausible nor appealing in ecological terms, and his acquiescence to centralization and technology cannot be accepted by ecologists working for decentralization and alternative technologies.

According to Plumwood’s critique, an ecologist hoping for firm Marxist ground on which to take a position instead quickly sinks into quicksand. Rather than reinterpret Marx or engage in obscure attempts at reconstruction, Plumwood argued, the ecology movement must set aside Marx’s homo-centric transformation of nature and look for solid ground instead. Her contention gained widespread notice at the time and was cited frequently within the literature surrounding the search for a red/green coalition, along with the lengthier and more developed critique of Marx that Eckersley (1992) provided a decade later. However, Plumwood’s legacy as an ecological thinker arose primarily from her ecofeminist writings (e.g., Plumwood, 1993), rather than her attempt to dethrone Marx from his status as an ecological hero.

Transcending Marx: Bookchin, Social Ecology, and Dialectical Naturalism

In this search for solid ground, Bookchin was one green theorist who believed he had found it in both objective and ethical terms. As a lifelong leftist who had moved from Marxism to Trotskyism to libertarian anarchism to a position he called libertarian municipalism, Bookchin saw his project as one of using “the dialectical approach of Marx in order to transcend Marxism itself dialectically,” in the words of his collaborator and partner Janet Biehl (1997, p. 123). Unlike the mainstream environmental movement, Bookchin argued that environmental problems are caused by institutionalized domination of humans by other humans. Unlike many radical ecologists such as Plumwood, he rejected biocentric moral standing, and unlike eco-Marxists such as Parsons, he turned his attention beyond capitalist modes of production and class structures.

In an odd way, Bookchin’s distinctive approach, called social ecology, has been at once all-encompassing and yet peculiarly restrictive. Even while his half century of published writing took on all of human history and his ideas have constituted one of the most extensively developed and influential theories within the North American ecological movement, social ecology as a body of work has continued to be identified almost exclusively with him alone. He earned a deserved reputation for brutal (but highly quotable) polemics against deep ecologists, ecofeminists, and other members of the green movement who had practiced, in his view, anti-rational mysticism, sentimentalism, and misanthropy with tendencies toward eco-fascism (Bookchin, 1988). As one

example, he characterized deep ecology as “spawned among well-to-do people who have been raised on a spiritual diet of Eastern cults mixed with Hollywood and Disneyland fantasies” (Bookchin, 1990, p. 11). He was less well-known for—but equally pitiless in—his attacks on theoretical colleagues and associates who moved too far from his own stand. Some ecological theorists became so concerned about this increasing isolation and its portents that an edited volume was devoted to the question of whether social ecology had a future beyond Bookchin (Light, 1998). The answer so far is uncertain. Since his death in 2006, new volumes continue to examine and “recover” Bookchin’s work (Price, 2012; White, 2008) and the Institute for Social Ecology, which he founded, maintains momentum. However, despite the broad use of the phrase “social ecology” in the causal analysis of crime, disease, and other social ills, social ecology as a form of environmental political theory continues to be associated almost entirely with Bookchin’s work.

Whether Bookchin’s version of social ecology was able to develop through interaction with other leftist and ecological traditions or stood apart in isolation, there is no doubt that his theories deserve critical and constructive debate. As a libertarian anarchist/municipalist focused on questions of liberty, he argued that a free society also must be an ecological society, a foundational conclusion based on an evolutionary approach he called dialectical naturalism. Nature is not simply all that exists (the “real”), according to Bookchin (1996), but an organic evolutionary development of the rational realization of the potential (the “actual”; p. 125). From a purely biological world, which he called the “first nature,” this process of potentialities moves from the inanimate to the animate, from the simple to the complex and differentiated, from the subatomic to the sentient and social human world, or the “second nature.” In *The Ecology of Freedom* (1991), Bookchin traced a logical and anthropological history of society from “organic” preliterate groups operating on egalitarian principles through the emergence of hierarchies based on factors such as age, shamanism, gender, chiefdom, and eventually, classes and nation-states. Institutionalized hierarchy is therefore found only among humans, as animal communities are not social, Bookchin argued, and the results have been catastrophic. These “organized systems of command and obedience” sabotage the realization of the evolutionary potential in the second nature, through domination of humans by other humans, as well as in the first nature, through domination and destruction of nonhuman life and ecosystems.

In Bookchin’s (1996) view, freedom is impossible unless domination in all of its complexity is exposed and eliminated, and “the resolution of this social crisis can only be achieved by reorganizing society along rational lines, imbued with an ecological philosophy and sensitivity” (p. 120). As a result, his consideration of evolutionary development did not stop at the second nature: Dialectical naturalism

continuous. Its objectivity begins with the existence of the potential, not with the mere facticity of the real; hence its ethics seeks the “what-should-be” as a realm of *objective* possibilities. (Bookchin, 1996, p. 134, italics in original)

What should be, according to Bookchin, is an ecological society of “free nature” that, as synthesis, would transcend both the first and second nature while maintaining their integrity and specificity (p. 136).

This blend of ecological anarchism and dialectical reasoning shuns the anti-rational, misanthropic sentimentality of biocentric greens, according to Bookchin, as well as constituting a foundational critique of Marxist thought. Dialectical naturalism challenges not only the reductionism of domination introduced by feminism and mystical ecologism, he charged, “but also brings into question the one-sided economic simplifications that are rooted in traditional Marxian class analyses.” The importance of class should not be ignored in ecological considerations, he cautioned, but “class rule must be placed in the much *larger* context of hierarchy and domination as a whole” (Bookchin, 1991, p. xxvi, italics in original).

Bookchin, like Benton, found much room for challenge in Marx’s writings and he regularly voiced his cantankerous contempt. In addition to the exclusivity of class analysis, Marx must be faulted for purveying the “myth” of the proletariat and party, in Bookchin’s view. As an anarchist, Bookchin expressed deep antagonism to Marx’s vision of a centralized state and, like Plumwood, he rejected the authoritarian regimes that ruled in Marx’s name in the 20th century. While revolutionary anarchists stressed choice, Bookchin (1990) wrote, Marxism focused on “the inexorability of social laws.” As a tragic result, “Marxism virtually silenced all earlier revolutionary voices for more than a century and held history itself in the icy grip of a remarkably bourgeois theory of development based on the domination of nature and the centralization of power” (pp. 168-169).

In addition, Bookchin repudiated a view that, he argued, Marx shared with many 19th-century philosophers: the concept of nature as a stingy provider with whom humans must wrestle to maintain life. This vision of natural scarcity meant that liberation must be achieved, at least in part, through technological innovations that allow human command of the forces of nature. Without scientific and industrial know-how, according to Marx, nature always holds the upper hand. Without technology, surpluses are nonexistent, just enough to support elite rulers or, if distributed equally, a means of equal poverty. Liberation can be achieved only after technology spurs development of the productive forces to a point at which humans are freed from material want and “bread labor.” The abolition of a class system, therefore, presupposes extensive technological progress. Marx’s belief in natural scarcity and mandatory technological development, according to Bookchin’s critique, thus led Marx to affirm the role of domination as an inevitable part of our need to control the natural world. The implications of this approach were

is eductive rather than merely deductive, mediated rather than merely processual, and cumulative rather than merely

devastating, Bookchin argued. Marx believed that to conquer nature and its grudging provisions,

[p]eople become instruments of production, just like the tools and machines they create. They, in turn, are subject to the same forms of coordination, rationalization, and control that society tries to impose on nature and inanimate technical instruments. Labor is both the medium whereby humanity forges its own self-formation and the object of social manipulation. (Bookchin, 1991, p. 65)

Bookchin unfavorably compared this view to Greek political thought, which saw men fulfilling their humanity by means of rational life within a *polis*. In contrast, Marx's argument that men are defined by their mode of production turned domination into a technical question, not an ethical one. Marx's "incredibly reductionist framework" asked us to judge issues of domination in terms of technical criteria, "however distasteful such a criterion might have seemed to Marx himself, had he faced it in all its brute clarity" (Biehl, 1997, p. 126).

Marx not only offered a simplistic view of the revolutionary path to economic liberty, Bookchin argued, but provided a stunning defense for domination itself. Marx saw classes' reason for existence, once they had arisen, in the pursuit of the ultimate goal of the "good life" through domination of nature, which, in turn, demanded the manipulation of labor by an elite class of bosses. For Marx, the exploitation of humans as tools of production was simply a step toward mastery of nature by humans in their pursuit of liberation under communism. His goal may have been a valuable one, Bookchin (1991) wrote, but "no more plausible apologia for the existence of class or state rule has ever appeared over the course of history, and few have provided better excuses for domination than this one" (p. xxvii).

Disastrously, in Bookchin's view, the conclusion to Marx's concept of natural scarcity and surplus achieved through technology was an acquiescent "fatalism" that saw liberation intrinsically tied to domination of man by man *because* of the need to dominate nature, thus placing "the onus for domination primarily on the demanding forces of nature." That was a conclusion Bookchin (1996) vigorously disallowed:

My own writings radically reverse this very traditional view of the relationship between society and nature. I argue that the idea of dominating nature first arose within society as part of its institutionalization into gerontocracies that placed the young in varying degrees of servitude to the old and in patriarchies that placed women in varying degrees of servitude to men—not in any endeavor to "control" nature or natural forces . . . Hence, domination can be definitively removed only by resolving problematics that have their origins in hierarchy and status, not in class and the technological control of nature alone. (p. 142, n. 2)

While Bookchin's critique of Marx was broad and sometimes harsh, he cannot easily be placed with Plumwood as

one who called for rejection of Marxist theory; he granted applause to Marx's theory of commodification and many parts of his theory of capitalist development. Most importantly, in terms of social ecology, Bookchin recognized his allegiance to Marx in two roles: first, Bookchin was a purveyor of the tradition of dialectical reasoning "that Marx had inherited from Hegel and that Bookchin himself inherited from Marx" (Biehl, 1997, p. 124), and second, as a steward through the Marxist tradition of the Enlightenment's commitment to humanism and rationalism. By remaining committed to these parts of the Marxist inheritance, Bookchin believed, social ecology could fight the urgent battle against dangerous intellectual sloppiness within the ecological movement. These elements, he worried, may be spurned by "eco-faddists" who "either ignore muscularity of thought as too 'heavy' or else . . . condemn it as intellectually 'linear' and 'divisive'" (1996, p. 98). At the same time, he argued, "ecologizing the dialectic" allowed his theory to address the differentiation and potentialities of nature as well as the complex forms of social domination, thus ensuring, in his view, that social ecology transcends Marx.

Conclusion

Is Marxist theory conducive to political ecology? Answers to this question clearly are not built on consensus. The Marxist portfolio is massive, sometimes inconsistent, and characterized by ambiguity, and vehement arguments in the debate over whether Marxist theory is ecologically sensitive have ranged from an absolute "yes" to an irrevocable "no" to a great many versions of "not exactly, but . . ." Parsons' response provided a model of those Marxist defenders who viewed the environmental project as wholly in tune with the socialist project and Marx's writings as the most appropriate source of environmental theory. Benton, in contrast, represents the large body of work that has been at once sympathetic to foundational elements of Marxist theory yet cognizant of the historical and theoretical weaknesses that demand revision. Serving as the illustration of environmental political theorists who have found no promising basis within Marxist thought, Plumwood (writing as Routley) called for the rejection of Marx and the construction of ecological theory from other sources. Finally, working from a dialectical understanding of nature that both recognizes and undermines Marx, Bookchin offered a complex critique in his project of transcending Marxist theory.

In their writings from the 1970s through the 1990s, these four theorists set the stage for continued, divisive, and valuable analyses of ecological and Marxist theory. Their disagreements, defenses, and arguments promoted a deeper and more critical understanding of Marxist theory, turning us toward a crucial avenue of interrogation of Marx's understanding of humans, nature, and the environment. The debate remains both vigorous and contentious more than a decade later, as signaled by the longevity of the neo-Marxist journal

Capitalism, Nature, and Socialism and demonstrated by the increasingly sophisticated analyses of Marxist theory within the interdisciplinary project of political ecology and the growing subfield of environmental political thought.

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