

# SUSTAINING MARX OR SUSTAINING NATURE?

An Ecofeminist Response to Foster and Burkett

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John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett's article, "The Dialectic of Organic/Inorganic Relations" (2000) provides valuable exposition of Marx's text on the humanity-nature relation. Marx's materialism was a path-breaking exemplar of how to think about that vexed interface. Far too often, conversations about humanity-nature links elicit public confusion or intellectual hostility. For example, my own discipline of sociology is at a total loss when it comes to articulating the connection. Now, I take this to be an inevitable outcome of the industrial division of labour, under which form of social organization—a highly gendered one—people become alienated from the material ground that sustains their bodies and forms their sensibilities. My response to Foster and Burkett sets out to show how this alienation scars not only everyday life but theoretical production as well, including that of Marx. The more specific purpose of my comments is to aerate the charge of "idealism" that Foster and Burkett use against ecological critics of Marx. That discussion, in turn, introduces a fresh perspective on Marx's "instrumental" attitude to nature, an aspect of his theory that they are keen to deny.

Foster and Burkett open their argument for Marx as an ecologist with a discussion of his allusion to nature as "man's inorganic body." They note how unpopular the word *inorganic* is in contemporary ecopolitical discourse, whereas *organic* is a privileged signifier among alternative life stylers and eco-metaphysicians. In a defence of Marx as an ecologist, Foster and Burkett develop this organic/inorganic dichotomy into a rhetorical dualism. Thus, on one hand, you have those who celebrate ecocentric holism in nature as "organic," and on the other, you have those who celebrate the anthropocentric industrialising use of nature as "inorganic." Foster and Burkett attribute Marx's ecological critics with the first attitude and see them, in turn, attributing the second attitude to Marx. The critics are identified as the new physicist Fritjof Capra (1982); social ecologist John Clark (1989); political scientist Robyn Eckersley (1992); philosophers Kate Soper (1996), Val Routley (1981), and John O'Neill (1994); and ecofeminist Ariel Salleh (1997, 2000).

Although positions among these individuals often diverge markedly, Foster and Burkett bypass the detail, classifying the group uniformly as "one-sidedly idealist" in approach. Some of these ecopolitical thinkers will no doubt contest this summary judgment, as I will below. For the charge of idealism certainly does not apply to my own work, and their blanket categorization obscures more than it reveals about the other scholars named. Before debating Foster and Burkett, however, I want to emphasize the common ground between us. And, I will do this by situating our respective standpoints in the spectrum of current methodologies, materialist to ide-

alist. Foster and Burkett draw on Maurice Mandelbaum (1971, pp. 25-27) to amplify what they mean by materialism. To paraphrase, it will hold to the notion (a) of an objectively existing world, (b) of humans as materially embedded entities, and (c) of body and mind as an interacting unity. As I see it, these assumptions can be opened out into the following rough spectrum of methodologies on the humanity-nature problematic.

- Position A, that the world exists independently of human knowing, implies a realist ontology. In positing general processes such as thermodynamics or evolution, and variable factors such as locality, it assumes nature or society can be known directly using a positivist epistemology. The approach is basic to physics, biology, and an empiricist sociology but stands in marked contrast to the dialectical reasoning that Marx and Engels brought to materialism.<sup>1</sup>
- Position B, that humans are embedded in the ground of nature and history, adopts a materialist and dialectical way of thinking, where ontology and epistemology are inseparable. In bridging biological and social phenomena, it applies praxis or historical judgment. The approach is basic to a political economy and to ecopolitical thought.
- Position C, that body and mind are a mutually informing unity, likewise adopts a materialist and dialectical way of thinking, where ontology and epistemology are inseparable. In tracing how ideas shape and are shaped by human action on the world, it applies self-conscious sociological reflexivity. The approach is basic to a critical and emancipatory theory of society.

A further methodology, beyond those implicit in Mandelbaum's statement, is influenced by linguistic anthropology.

- Position D, that the world does not exist independently of human knowing, implies an idealist ontology. In positing social life as entirely constituted by discursive practices, it assumes that society—and the nature that it constructs—can only be known through deconstructive readings. The approach has become common in cultural studies and the new humanities.

Aside from an occasional unguardedly positivist reference by Foster and Burkett to "standard scientific usage," I expect we would agree that Position A is not relevant to our discussion. We would also agree on the centrality of Position B, though I would highlight Position C as well, whereas they have little to say about this. We would probably agree in rejecting the idealist ontology of Position D but disagree on the usefulness of applying its deconstructive technique in a kind of soft constructionism or "critical realism." Critical realists (Bhaskar, 1989) accept the material objectivity of nature, but on the understanding that knowledge of it is shared through the medium of socially constructed languages, ranging from everyday talk to disciplinary jargons. In sum, I think a consistently materialist scholarship should be comfortable with a dialectical relation between Positions B, C, and some D, as in this kind of triangulation, each approach or lens rounds out understandings of the other.

The fact that a qualified constructionism is not antithetical to Marxist analysis is demonstrated by the work of Bertell Ollman (1992).<sup>2</sup> His almost postmodern reading of Marx eases out seeming inconsistencies in the master text by showing how a variety of lenses, discourses, or levels of abstraction was used in his political econ-

omy for different purposes. Foster and Burkett follow a similar exegetical procedure in arguing that Marx's unpopular wording on nature as man's "inorganic body" should not be read as a denigration of nature's value. And, I think that is fair enough.

A related issue, which they might also have raised in their defence of Marx, concerns the Comtian "hierarchy of the sciences" notion circulating in his day.<sup>3</sup> This methodological scheme again distils a single material reality through a series of discrete disciplinary lenses, namely, mathematics, astronomy, physics, biology, and sociology, each offering a decreasing order of abstraction. Whereas Comte himself was a positivist, Marx, as a dialectician, moved easily between such discourses and their alternative formulations of the inorganic, organic, and so forth. Modern readers of Marx mostly lack that facility because 20th-century science undermined dialectical reasoning, consolidating the hegemony of positivist thought and identitarian logic.

Foster and Burkett (2000) maintain that Marx's analysis, rooted in an evolutionary history of the human species, is essential to an adequate environmental ethic. This situates their thinking solidly in Position B. But, does it then background, or even omit, more critical sociological and cultural aspects of the humanity—nature dialectic—Positions C and D? I would say it does, judging from their reaction to my association of Marx with the "Great Chain of Being" ontology (p. 407). Foster and Burkett treat that as tantamount to saying Marx was influenced by medieval Scholastics. Their rebuttal is to trace his materialist intellectual lineage via Epicurus, Gassendi, and others, disavowing any connection between Marx and the Great Chain. Yet, they themselves locate the Great Chain ideology within Locke's repertoire (p. 409), connecting Locke to Marx, in turn, in a footnote (p. 443, Note 10). These seeming inconsistencies aside, Foster and Burkett simply miss the point of my remark about the Great Chain of Being.

My intention is to emphasise how the cognitive absorption of ideas is only part of the intellectual production process. The culture of everyday life also informs the tacit assumptions that a theorist works with. The thrust and nuance of his or her thought may well take paths laid down by this mundane medium; the scholar, often unconscious of such influences, is then unable to deal with them in the reflexive way characteristic of Position C above. Foster and Burkett's preference for working with Position B leaves them vulnerable in this respect. For in the absence of tools for analysing the cultural and psychological dimensions of social life, they may fall into a one-sided economic materialism. Over the years, many Marxists have dealt with this disciplinary blindness by using projection as a defence. In other words, lacking a language for recognising and articulating the embodied materialism of cultural processes, they write off any discussion of them as "idealist."

But, culture is always relevant in fashioning the lenses scholars use. In particular, students of Marx need to interrogate his culturally determined decision to develop a theory of value exclusively around (men's) productive industrial labour as distinct from (women's) socially reproductive domestic labour. His selective focus was indicative of typically 19th-century patriarchal concerns—and the resulting theory, for all its explanatory power, should not be applied universally in an uncritical way. Examining traditional Eurocentric notions of "nature," framed by the crude presociological belief in a Great Chain of Being, helps us move beyond Marx's partiality. For this makes clear how the device of nature, pivotal to masculine/feminine, productive/reproductive dichotomies, has functioned as an instrument of domination. Elizabeth Dodson Gray (1979) first drew ecofeminist attention to the Great Chain ideology that informs the Judeo-Christian heritage. More important,

she spelled out its material objectification of women, and of nature, in social structure. Here is a status hierarchy of God's domination over man and men's domination over women, the darker races, children, animals, and finally wilderness. Moreover, men as God's stewards in this ancient mythical covenant represent humanity proper, whereas lower echelons belong to the unclean sphere of nature. Mankind (meaning men) is accorded "rights," and all the rest are "resources" at his disposal.

Western economics, law, science, religion, and even poetry and humour have all been built around this cultural (read *political*) metaphor. Eurocentric patriarchal and evolutionist ideas obtain de facto plausibility, even validation from its supposedly commonsense order of things. Its "natural rightness" is imprinted—that is materially embodied—with each generation by skipping around to the nursery chant "Farmer in the Dell." One, two, three, four . . .

The farmer takes a wife, the farmer takes a wife,  
 High ho the dairyo, the farmer takes a wife,  
 The wife takes a child, the wife takes a child,  
 High ho the dairyo, the wife takes a child,  
 The child takes a dog, the child takes a dog,  
 High ho the dairyo, the child takes a dog,  
 The dog takes a cat, the dog takes a cat,  
 High ho the dairyo, the dog takes a cat,  
 The cat takes a mouse, the cat takes a mouse,  
 High ho the dairyo, the cat takes a mouse,  
 The mouse takes the cheese, the mouse takes the cheese,  
 High ho the dairyo, the mouse takes the cheese,  
 The cheese stands alone [in/organic nature], the cheese stands alone,  
 High ho the dairyo, the cheese stands alone.

The Great Chain of Being was an active condition of the culture that Marx lived in, and it continues to be a force in our time. Even so, although Marx's thinking was not immune to its influence, there is no doubt that the logic of his political economy moves us toward emancipation from this oppressive grid. This is why many women scholars and activists are stimulated by his work.

The kind of socialist ecological feminism that I am interested in contributing to is a materialist sociology of knowledge, taking into account the embeddedness of human activity in natural and sociocultural conditions, Positions B and C above. This means recognising the ways in which most Western thought is race and gender blind and how race- and gender-marginalised knowledges are made invisible in everyday life and in theory. Conversely, Foster and Burkett tend to emphasise the seeding of concepts from one great White man to another—a form of intellectual history that operates as if those men were somehow untouched by their mundane life context as human beings. Ironically, although Foster and Burkett aim to expound materialist insights, this approach generates a rather linear idealist and nondialectical history of ideas *sui generis*.

The celebration, respect, and thoroughness that Foster and Burkett (2000) bring to their reading of Marx's text are not extended to those they identify as Marx's ecological critics. So, they judge their colleagues all too quickly, as this quote from their article reveals.

At issue in the standard critique of Marx's organic/inorganic distinction then are two [*sic*] different and strongly opposed visions of ecological philosophy: one that

is materialist, historical, and essentially scientific in character; the other that derives its emphasis from mystical distinctions between anthropocentric and ecocentric and from spiritualistic allusions to nature's teleology. From the latter standpoint, it is impossible to perceive the real [*sic*] class-exploitive alienation of nature. (p. 422)

The discursive strategy adopted here for defending the classical Marx is a reductive one. It pulverises a plurality of voices and reconstitutes them in a good/bad dualism. In the case of my own work, Foster and Burkett's conclusion suggests to me that their reading of *Ecofeminism as Politics* (Salleh, 1997) was preoccupied largely with my passages on Marx per se, and in a way that disconnects that commentary from the book's central theme. Their blanket charge of idealism certainly bypasses my plea for a 21st-century re-visioning of Marxism in terms of an "embodied materialism."

In reply to their positivist assertion about dealing with "the real class-exploitive alienation of nature," I will briefly outline the terrain of this ecofeminist re-visioning and its implication for "class" analysis. For when Foster and Burkett (2000) write, "What is needed . . . is a non-deterministic materialism and ecological humanism that recognise the dialectical linkages between humanity and nature" (p. 421), I wholeheartedly concur with them—and hope this dialogue moves us even further toward convergent understandings. The humanity-nature dialectic has been central to my ecofeminist work these past two decades. However, looking at the human material condition through a gendered lens, we see that the idea of "nature" implicates one half of humanity in a curious way. In other words, the tacit Great Chain of Being ideology and its reflections, such as Marx's prioritisation of productive over reproductive labour, construct women as belonging not to "history" but to "nature." Most ecopolitical thinkers have yet to grasp this fact, which is why ecofeminists are still trying to bring it to conscious awareness.

In theoretical terms, a gender-sensitive "embodied materialism" will work dialectically back and forth between human embeddedness in nature (Position B), reflexive self-awareness (Position C), and from the vantage point of each; it makes deconstructive readings (Position D) of earlier materialisms—including Marxism. Like other new social movements, ecofeminism privileges a politics of the body focused on sexuality, race, and environmental habitat. In this, it engages directly with the artificial humanity-nature divide. Marxist analyses of production and nature's commodification also deal with this interface, but in ecofeminism there is a shift away from "production" toward "reproduction" in its several senses.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the constructionist aspect of ecofeminism questions the very foundations of historical materialism, with its purportedly transhistorical concepts of history, nature, and productive labour. Offering a transcendent political critique, ecofeminism asks if there are not deeper causal structures, general processes, and particular contingencies formative of older gender-innocent Marxist understandings?

Moving across disciplines and Positions B, C, and D, ecofeminists see the humanity versus nature dualism, and the split between productive versus reproductive labours, reflecting a profound alienation. It is a split embodied in the social construction of masculine gender identity and in the social construction of its thought products. With this gender critique, ecofeminism comes forward as a remedial, transitional politics, appropriate to a certain historical conjuncture—the present. It reads deconstructively beneath the alienations that keep new social movements fragmented and focused on single issues, Position D. And, it invites ecopolitical activists and theorists of eco-Marxism, social ecology, or deep ecology to be more

reflexive about how their scholarship absorbs and reinforces profoundly gendered forms of alienation, Position C. In undertaking this task, ecofeminism operates as a sociology of knowledge.

An ecofeminist lens addresses the material reproduction of daily life as a priori to industrial production, and this will flow on to Marxist concepts of contradiction, class, and value, demanding new formulations. It follows that the book *Ecofeminism as Politics* (Salleh, 1997) asks eco-Marxists to reorient their thinking around the “deepest contradiction” underlying the capitalist organisation of production and its division of labour. This material contradiction is preserved in theory and in everyday life by socially pervasive but un-self-conscious Great Chain of Being assumptions. The deepest contradiction is materially embodied in masculine thought, in masculine practices and products. The objective expression of the contradiction is the economic marshalling of women and indigenes outside of humanity proper, and in the resource base of nature held at the disposal of industrialising men. These externalised groupings constitute an unspoken “class,” even though their reproductive labours are essential to capitalist economies. I use the term *meta-industrial class* to describe such people whose “labour” is considered “outside” of capitalism and is untheorised in Marxist class analysis, for example, domestic caregivers, peasant farmers, and indigenous hunter gatherers. Although culturally disparate, each grouping is involved in mediating material nature, and doing so in precautionary ways.

Class analysis aside, from a transcendent ecopolitical perspective, the uniquely sustaining character of the work that meta-industrials do points to a way out of ecologically destructive production. How is this? Materialist ecofeminists such as Mies and Shiva (1993; Shiva, 1989), Bennholdt-Thomsen, Faraclas, & von Werlhof (2001), Terlinden (1984), Adam (1998), Ruddick (1989), and myself (Salleh, 1997, 2000) observe that under industrialisation, productive labours are inevitably “instrumental.” They cut across the metabolism of nature, breaking apart complex webs of biological interchange. By contrast, the character of meta-industrial labour is reproductive, attuned to the timings and cyclic transformations of nature—including our bodies. An embodied materialism highlights the relational, indeed dialectical, logic of reproductive labours and its unique sensibility, one might even say a people’s science, censored by the vanities of modernism. Nor is meta-industrial labour, as a process of human partnership with nature, necessarily gender specific. Ecological “holding” practices are found across genders among indigenous peoples. The gendering of reproductive labour as we know it is simply a historically contingent aspect of industrialised societies and their alienating division of labour.

In this analysis of meta-industrial skills, ecofeminism recognises a nonalienating way of objectifying natural human energies in labour and its potential for a long-term symbiosis of humanity-nature. With the notion of labour as a form of ecological holding, debate over Marx’s instrumental attitude to nature or otherwise becomes a sort of red herring. Industrially productive labour is intrinsically “instrumental” in relation to nature. Moreover, as I argue elsewhere (Salleh, 1997, 2000), this materialist restatement of the humanity-nature interface may be used to enhance political alliancing between ecology, gender, postcolonial, and worker struggles in an era of globalisation. I join Foster and Burkett in seeking a future based on self-managed communal provisioning. But, using an ecofeminist and, therefore, embodied materialist lens, I find the key labour base or vanguard of this “future” already active among the majority of people on earth today. Their meta-industrial work creates an articulation of the humanity-nature relation that is very

different from Eurocentric patriarchal notions of it. And, it is time that this alternative knowledge was heard in the conversations of political economy and addressed by solid Marxist scholars such as Foster and Burkett.

Textual exegesis is not enough to sustain Marx's great contribution. As his own critical theses on idealism urge, materialism requires a dialectical cycle of theory and praxis, getting our hands dirty to test our understandings. In this respect, as English Marxist Nigel Lee (2001) put it recently in *Capital and Class*, ecofeminists "have taken some aspects of Marx more seriously than many Marxists" (p. 217). Grounded in grassroots political experience, ecofeminist thinking about labour broadens the emancipatory project by integrating gender equality, cultural diversity, and ecological sustainability. In doing this, it nurtures a common denominator for ecology, postcolonial, feminist, and socialist political struggles. Marxists must grasp that it is no longer simply a matter of "us versus them"; these new movements bring practical opportunities to verify and energise theory. Now scholars such as Foster and Burkett need to be materialist enough to learn from these activists when classical constructs no longer fit reality. After all, there is not much point in sustaining Marx while letting nature go to the (capitalist) dogs.

### NOTES

1. Dialectics is relational thought, seeking to understand how entities continuously form and re-form by interaction with other entities. Unlike everyday common sense, ideology, or scientific positivism, dialectical reasoning focuses on process rather than substance, on non-identity rather than identity.

2. See also the discussion of Bertell Ollman's approach in Salleh (1997), *Ecofeminism as Politics*, chapter 10.

3. Nor do Foster and Burkett mention the direct influence on Marx of Auguste Comte's mentor Saint-Simon (Manuel, 1963).

A second sense in which different discourses are at play in Marx's work is easier to grasp. It stems from the fact that his understanding evolved from its original basis in philosophy to more mature work informed by studies in political economy.

4. In this context, the term *reproduction* extends across several kinds of activity and may apply to the maintenance of biological processes, economic relations, or cultural practices.

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