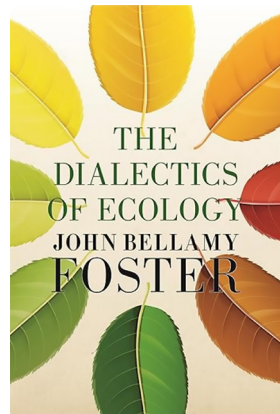


John Bellamy Foster:

The Dialectics of Ecology: Socialism and Nature

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How can we transcend the alienation of humanity and nature, and create a world of substantive equality and ecological sustainability? That is the question that animates John Bellamy Foster's latest book, *The Dialectics of Ecology*. Building on his previous work, in which he recovered Marx's ecological critique of capitalism based on the idea of "metabolic rift" (Foster 2000) and traced its influence from Marx to the present day (Foster 2020), Foster turns to the method of "dialectical ecology" to explore practical solutions to the ecological contradictions of our time (p. 14). Across ten chapters, each of which was written and published separately and can therefore be approached "as a 'totality' in itself" (p. 10), Foster follows the historical evolution of the "dialectics of nature and society" and applies its lessons to our age of planetary crisis. Like in his previous work, Foster shows exceptional command of his material, although the anthological (and as a result relatively less systematic) nature of the book means that the material might be harder to follow for those unfamiliar with contemporary eco-socialist debates. Even so, *The Dialectics of Ecology* is a worthwhile read that offers a window into the current thinking of an author who, more than twenty years ago, was at the forefront of the revival of ecological Marxism – a field that today serves as a starting point for any ecological critique of capitalism.



Some of the themes of *The Dialectics of Ecology* will be familiar to long-time readers of Foster's work. The suppression of Marx's work on ecology during the twentieth century – by now a well-known fact, thanks in large part to Foster's earlier writing on this topic (Foster 2000) – is addressed in great detail, allowing Foster to respond to recent revisionist accounts of this story. Foster rejects, for example, Kohei Saito's claim that it was Engels's worldview and its adoption by

the Second International that led to the suppression of Marx's dialectics of nature and society (Saito 2023, 45 – 51). Instead, Foster argues that Marx's and Engels's approaches were in fact quite similar and only suppressed much later, following Stalin's rise to power and the emergence of Western Marxism (pp. 96 – 103). But Foster tells another story, too, reprising the themes of his previous book, *The Return of Nature* (Foster 2020). In this story, Marx's ecology continued to have a strong, even if neglected, influence in British and American natural science and materialist philosophy, despite its marginalisation by both Soviet and Western Marxism. Foster explains, for example, how the Soviet delegation's presentation of the results of Soviet dialectical natural science at the Second Congress on International History of Science in London in 1931 influenced a generation of socialist scientists (pp. 25 – 27). In fact, all ecological thought after Marx, Foster writes, "up to ecosystem theory and Earth System analysis, was to be rooted in the same essential approach, focusing on metabolism" (p. 47).

In Foster's view, it is necessary to recover this method of materialist dialectics – or "dialects of ecology," as he calls it – in order to establish the theoretical basis for a "new global environmental praxis" (p. 41). The dialectics of ecology can help us move beyond critique and start developing a socialist ecological politics appropriate for the Anthropocene. This is all the more important because, contrary to some recent interpretations, Marx's writing does not on its own give us practical solutions to the ecological contradictions of our time (pp. 8 – 9). Instead, we are now faced with "two opposing tendencies" with different prescriptions for how to respond to the global ecological crisis. On the one hand, some are proposing the "acceleration of capital through the financialization of nature" – a proposal that "can only lead to total disaster, the barren negation of humanity itself" (p. 41). On the other hand, we find two alternative socialist projects – the idea of ecological civilisation coming from China, and the strategy of planned degrowth in rich economies (p. 9). These two socialist projects will eventually have to converge, according to Foster, but how they do so remains to be seen – and it is precisely the method of dialectical ecology that can help us integrate the ecological and political-economic critiques of capitalism with ongoing debates around socialist ecological politics.

It is these more practical contemporary debates that are the primary focus of *The Dialectics of Ecology*. Questions around financialization and commodification of nature animate two chapters in the book. Foster traces the way in which the notion of "natural capital" – a concept developed in the nineteenth century by radical political economists critical of capitalism's focus on

exchange-value – has, in the hands of neo-classical economists, become a tool for monetising ecosystem services, with disastrous results. For nineteenth century radicals like Marx, “natural capital” referred to the “real wealth” of society – the use-values that nature provided to humans and on which the economy depended in a physical sense (pp. 106 – 108). Neo-classical economists, by contrast, have sought to exclude use-value altogether, reducing everything to exchange-value – a view that has led them to regard natural resources (or “natural capital”) as entirely substitutable by human-made capital (pp. 113 – 114). This has paved the way for redefining nature in purely market terms and reducing it to an asset capable of producing an income (p. 118). In recent years, it has justified the displacement of peasants and indigenous populations from their communal lands by corporations seeking to monopolise valuable ecosystems. But this market-driven approach to the conservation of nature, according to which the destruction of natural capital in one place can be compensated by new natural capital elsewhere, misses a crucial fact – that ecosystems are unique and their destruction often irreversible (p. 130). For sustainable human development to be possible, Foster argues, attempts to commodify nature must be resisted.

But what does sustainable human development look like in practice? In the second half of the book, Foster examines two possible answers – ecological civilisation and planned degrowth. The concept of ecological civilisation, which today is notably central to China’s national development policy, aims to create a sustainable mode of living in harmony with nature. Foster shows that China’s embrace of this concept owes a lot more to ecological Marxism than is often acknowledged (p. 161). From the 1970s, it was Soviet ecologists who first began to look at the problem of ecology as related to the general question of civilisation. Following the publication of *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation* in the Soviet Union in 1983, the idea of ecological civilisation found its way to China, where it combined with Daoism, Confucianism, and Neo-Confucianism to form one of the conceptual bases of China’s economic and social development. Today, the influence of Marx’s and Engels’s classical ecological analysis can be seen even in the pronouncements of China’s president Xi Jinping, who has stressed that humanity must observe the “laws of nature” and any harm inflicted on nature will “return to haunt us” (p. 163).

Related in many ways to the concept of ecological civilisation, although with a genealogy of its own, is the idea of “planned degrowth”. Planned degrowth requires the emergence of an “environmental proletariat”, which will bring together the global revolts against the expropriation of nature and

the exploitation of labour (pp. 237 – 238). Like ecological civilisation, planned degrowth aims to counter the drive of capital, which does not recognise any biophysical limits. At its core, degrowth rejects the idea of economic growth as the definition of human progress, advocating instead a steady-state economy, global redistribution of social surplus, and reduction of waste. Through these measures, degrowth can enhance the living conditions of the majority of people while maintaining the environmental conditions necessary for a liveable planet (pp. 239 – 240). This, however, is only possible through “significant” economic and social planning and a rejection of the “mythology of a self-regulating market system” (p. 244).

The Dialectics of Ecology is a timely collection of lucid essays which, to great effect, draw on the author’s breadth of knowledge. Foster does not quite succeed in delivering on his promise of making the book “more than the sum of its parts” (p. 10). Many of the essays synthesise and reflect on existing research rather than making an original intervention in ongoing debates. Nevertheless, Foster’s prose, clarity of presentation, and unparalleled knowledge of his field mean that *The Dialectics of Ecology* will be a rewarding read for anyone with an interest in political ecology.

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