

Ecology, Capitalism, and the Socialization of Nature

by John Bellamy Foster interviewed by Dennis Soron

2004

The Failure of Global Environmental Reform

Dennis Soron: Many environmentalists came away from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 with a great deal of optimism, believing that the cause of global environmental reform had finally been seriously placed on the political agenda. Today, with environmental conditions continuing to worsen and governments refusing to take effective action, it seems that little of this optimism remains. Why did the hopes spawned at Rio turn out to be so misplaced?

John Bellamy Foster: The optimism coming out of Rio was misplaced largely because environmental groups were not really contemplating the economic forces arrayed against them or considering how fundamentally the capitalist economic system is geared toward environmental degradation.

Over the past decade, we have seen the rapid expansion of a neoliberal trade and investment regime that has undermined the possibility of meaningful environmental reform. At the time of Rio, it should be recalled, the Uruguay Round of the GATT negotiations was underway. Out of these negotiations came the formation of the WTO, an organization that has really centralized a lot of international economic decision making and signaled that environmental regulations globally were going to go by the board. The WTO, as well as NAFTA, the IMF, the World Bank, and other neoliberal institutions, have made it abundantly clear that economic growth, at virtually any social or environmental cost, is their number one priority.

Other developments in recent years have also become flashpoints for the growing sense of pessimism in the environmental community—the U.S. withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, for instance, and the Bush administration's intransigent position on issues such as biological diversity, biotechnology, control of germ plasm, and so on. We need to remember, however, that while the U.S. has been acting unilaterally in many ways, it has not been alone in refusing seriously to address global warming and other environmental problems. The dynamics of the global economic system now dictate that there is a lot of reluctance right across the board among the major capitalist states in terms of taking effective environmental action.

By the time we arrived at the Johannesburg summit ten years after Rio, the overwhelming sense among environmental groups was that we had been losing ground on the environment and that the negotiations weren't going to accomplish anything at all. And they didn't. However dispiriting the loss of optimism may have been, the pessimism coming out of Johannesburg was in some ways actually a more realistic response to the nature of the problems we're now facing. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, for instance, has recently declared that their earlier estimates of what could

happen were too conservative, and that the possibility of a really big jolt to the world environment and to all life on the planet is much greater than they first thought. The signs all point to a mounting environmental crisis, and yet very little is being done politically to deal with it.

DS: In light of this kind of political inertia, do environmental groups need to reassess their current strategies for promoting change?

JBF: I think so. As you know, I've recently been quite critical of the strategies adopted by some groups. Take the example of the International Forum on Globalization and other similar organizations, which are very good and very progressive in many respects. In some of their recent reports, however, their main policy prescription is to "green" the World Bank, the WTO, and so on—that is, to somehow make these institutions "greener" and more environmentally friendly.

I think that this approach is completely ludicrous. These institutions are controlled primarily by capital, and their basic nature is not going to change. They are merely instruments of other powerful forces that need to be addressed. The whole purpose of the WTO, for instance, is to expand global capital accumulation, primarily to the benefit of the richest countries, by removing barriers to the international mobility of capital, eliminating state subsidies and regulations, and basically applying neoliberal prescriptions everywhere. To this extent, there is no way that it can be "greened" in some way or turned into an environmental organization.

To move forward, we need to be not only a lot more organized, but more realistic about the forces we're up against, and more willing to address the larger economic issues at the heart of today's environmental crisis. Most of all, the environmental movement needs to stop believing that simply talking to elite groups will somehow lead to a compromise that will save the environment. For the powers that be, the primary goal of "sustainable development" has come to be that of sustaining development—that is, sustaining economic development in the rich countries and sustaining the process of capital accumulation. There is no basis for a compromise with that kind of institutional reality.

Ecology Against Capitalism

DS: Unlike some fellow radical ecologists, who have tended to portray "modernity" or "industrialism" as the primary causes of environmental destruction, you've made a strong argument for the need to anchor ecological theory and practice in a systemic critique of capitalism. Could you elaborate on this point?

JBF: First of all, it is a simple and unavoidable fact that capitalism is the actual social system in which we live, and that our primary way of designating and understanding that system is to see it as capitalist. For a very long time now, social scientists from different disciplines and from across the political spectrum have agreed on this and have shared a basic understanding of how the system works.

In progressive circles, of course, people continue to debate about whether they should “name the system” or not, because sometimes it seems too radical or too grandiose to claim that capitalism itself is to blame for the problems we face. In contrast, the establishment shows no such reluctance to “name” capitalism. *Fortune* magazine and *Business Week* explicitly praise the virtues of capitalism all the time. Whatever approach one adopts, however, there is still very little doubt about what our social system actually is.

With respect to “industrialism,” we need to remember that capitalism was destructive of the environment on a global scale long before the Industrial Revolution—so the problem can’t simply be attributed to the presence of industrial production methods. “Modernity” is a category that is so over-arching that it is sometimes difficult to know precisely what it means. Whatever it is, and we could certainly discuss this topic for a long time, it isn’t a useful way of describing a social system. It might provide a way of describing a certain pattern of historical development characteristic of the social system we have today, but it doesn’t really point us to anything concrete.

If modernity itself were somehow to blame for environmental degradation, then the problem could be expected to exist only in “modern” societies. I think that this is too simplistic a conclusion to draw. My own view is that the ecological problem has existed for millennia, but that to understand it in any particular historical period we have to look concretely at the historical systems that are in place. I think that capitalism has been enormously destructive of the environment, but it is by no means the only social system that has been this way. Soviet-style systems were destructive of the environment in somewhat different ways for somewhat different reasons. Feudal and other tributary societies of earlier millennia were also enormously destructive of the environment. That said, the unprecedented magnitude of today’s global ecological crisis shows us that capitalism really takes the cake.

When you start looking concretely at the forces that are generating this crisis, it becomes clear that they are inseparable from the basic dynamics of the global capitalist system itself. Today, as much as ever, capitalism demands constant and rapid economic growth. Historically, it has generally been assumed that capitalist economies could be expected to enjoy an overall rate of growth of about 3 percent a year. At this rate, the world economy would increase sixteen times in a century, 250 times in two centuries, and 4000 times in three centuries. This is just an arithmetical game in a way, but it shows us that a system as expansive as the one we have is inevitably going to cause problems in the context of a limited biosphere. Indeed, the global economic system is increasingly beginning to rival the biogeochemical processes of the planet itself in terms of scale. Obviously, this situation casts doubt upon the viability and effectiveness of environmental approaches which simply take the imperative of capitalist growth for granted.

DS: In [Marx’s Ecology](#) and elsewhere, you’ve argued that the work of Marx is an underappreciated source of inspiration for radical ecological thinking. Doesn’t this run counter to certain prevailing assumptions about Marx and Marxist thought more generally? For many “green” thinkers, it has become commonplace to claim that Marx

was mostly indifferent to environmental questions, or was even blatantly anti-ecological in his “promethean” faith in economic and technological progress, his connection to an Enlightenment tradition oriented toward the “mastery” of nature, and so on.

JB: Yes, my work goes against this interpretation of Marx—and I’m by no means alone in this regard. Thanks to the work of a number of scholars, it is really quite heavily documented now that Marx wrote a great deal about ecological crisis and how to deal with it. Marx’s own materialist outlook was heavily influenced by nineteenth century soil scientist Justus von Liebig—something reflected in, among other things, his ideas about the “metabolic rift” that was occurring between the cities and rural areas and the ecological dislocations that this was causing. Such ideas were, and should continue to be, an important resource for the critical analysis of ecological problems.

The failure to appreciate fully the contributions of Marx arises, in part, from the growing tendency to regard ecological values and forms of understanding as fundamentally at odds with scientific and materialist modes of thought. Today, it is often assumed that being “ecological” means approaching the environment in a highly spiritualized and idealistic manner, and steering clear of the instrumental, reductive, and antagonistic attitude toward nature supposedly exemplified by science and the Enlightenment. Accordingly, being an environmentalist means rejecting “anthropocentric” ideals, cultivating a spiritual awareness of the inherent value of nature, and maybe even placing nature above human beings.

In contrast to this, there is another environmental tradition that has adopted a more materialist outlook and has actually produced most of the ecological science on which current debates over sustainability rest. This tradition in many ways recognized the environmental problem earlier and more substantively and—in my opinion—has a lot more to contribute to our understanding of what to do about it today. What’s more, it doesn’t create a simplistic binary framework in which you’re either anthropocentric or ecocentric, pro-human or pro-nature. Instead, it has realized that our main object of concern needs to be the nature of the *interaction* between humans and nature, the ways in which we organize our relation to nature. We have to recognize the intrinsic value of the natural world and strive to protect it, of course; but we also need to recognize that we cannot avoid transforming nature as we work and live within it. To this extent, our goal should be to transform it in sustainable ways, to develop a rational regulation of our relation to nature.

Here, Marx actually provides a lot of insights about regulating our relationship to the natural world, and about the ways in which environmental processes are intricately bound up with the development of society and social relations. Unfortunately, subsequent traditions of Marxist analysis did not really follow him, at least not for very long, in this direction, and the kernel of his ecological insights was lost. The anti-positivism of Western Marxism often manifested itself in a simple neglect of or hostility toward science. In contrast, the “dialectical materialism” coming out of the Soviet Union was overly positivistic and rested on a fetishized and distorted conception of science. Nuanced ecological analyses have tended to get lost in this split between, on the one

hand, a mechanized science that doesn't leave room for human beings and, on the other hand, a hermeneutic, humanistic tradition that rejects science altogether.

What we need is a more rational materialism that squarely addresses ecological issues and incorporates a concern for ecological crises and the need for sustainability into its economic perspective. To the extent that Marx was one of the thinkers that first laid out the principles for this type of materialism, I think that his work remains crucial for us today.

Toward an Ecological Morality

DS: While you are obviously wary of idealistic environmental positions premised upon “ecocentric” worldviews, new age spirituality, and so on, you’ve also argued that today’s ecological crisis is at the same time a crisis of values—one arising from the domination of market values over all others. Consequently, you’ve suggested that we stand in need of a “moral revolution” with regard to our relationship to nature, a revolution targeted not only at the irresponsible actions and decisions of individual consumers, politicians, and CEOs, but at the “higher immorality” of the capitalist system itself. How do we apply moral categories to the impersonal operations of an entire social system? Does this simply dispense with the notion of individual responsibility to which environmentalists today so often appeal?

JBF: Thinking of morality in these terms is certainly difficult, but necessary if we are to avoid simply individualizing blame for the ecological destruction generated by the capitalist market system. I’ve borrowed the term “higher immorality” from C. Wright Mills, who also used it as a means of expressing concern with the moral status of social structures that shape and constrain individual choices and actions.

Over time, we’ve gradually come to accept certain basic moral principles regarding human development—for instance, that individuals should be protected from arbitrary coercion and control, should be free to develop their capacities and talents, to participate in the democratic process, and so on. Such principles are, of course, invariably tied in with broader issues of social development, both in the sense that they evolved through human struggle and that they require certain social conditions to be realized in practice.

So how are we to regard a social system that blocks this type of human development? What if that system, much like our own, actually restricts the free development of most of the population and concentrates immense power in the hands of a very few? What if it is geared toward only the short-term interest of wealthy investors, and ignores the fate of vast populations today and centuries down the line? As I see it, this certainly seems to be a form of “higher immorality.”

Future generations, if they even exist, will likely not think very kindly of the people who wasted away the earth, or of the system that allowed them to do this in such an egregious manner. We need to realize that our moral responsibility toward these future generations

is not first and foremost a question of individual behavior, but is tied up with the whole structure of the society in which we, as individuals, participate in various ways.

Of course, we are all responsible for our individual actions to a certain point, but many of these actions are not entirely freely chosen, but are elicited and compelled by the particular social structures within which we operate. Marx, for instance, did not exactly paint capitalists in rosy colors, and yet he, perhaps more than any other major social critic of his time, refrained from blaming the failings of capitalism upon the greedy motives and misdeeds of individuals. He realized that if people are institutionally placed in the capitalist class, they can hardly be blamed for operating according to the established rules of the market and trying to get high returns on their stocks and investments. The problem is that this impersonal, profit-driven market process tends systematically to expropriate wealth from other people and destroy the environment.

Any institutional reality that destroys the environment and leaves future generations more impoverished in their relation to the natural world is a kind of higher immorality. Marx once wrote that human beings don't own the earth, that we simply use it and have to conserve and maintain it together for future generations. I think of this as the basic moral principle underlying all questions of sustainability—a universal guidepost for any society that believes that future generations should have an equal chance to our own.

Sadly, this basic principle holds little sway in our own society, which is rapidly using up the natural environment on which future generations depend. Most scientists now agree that 30–50 percent of all living species are going to be killed off in this century. They call this “the sixth extinction.” The last mass extinction on a comparable scale took place 65 million years ago, when the dinosaurs were killed off. We human beings are doing this to the earth—not merely as individuals, but as part of a social system that drives us in that direction and refuses to value anything but the accumulation of capital.

DS: Even amidst all of the political setbacks of recent years, large segments of the general population continue to express a relatively high level of concern for environmental issues. Unfortunately, most people increasingly can find few ways of enacting this concern beyond making environmentally-conscious personal lifestyle choices—to bike to work, take shorter showers, use energy-efficient light bulbs, recycle, compost, and so on. How can the environmental movement today begin to start channeling such popular expressions of ecological awareness and responsibility in a more transformative direction?

JBF: This will require a greater level of political organization and a greater willingness to take the bull by the horns. The environmental movement needs to face up to the fact that its goals run directly up against a highly intransigent opposition that is rooted in the power structures of capitalist society. Ultimately, achieving environmental sustainability will require us to transform those structures of power and not simply alter their minor manifestations.

Let me give you a concrete example. People are often told that, to be environmentally responsible, they should make the personal choice not to drive cars, and should instead make the effort to walk, ride a bicycle, or use public transport. Practically speaking, however, this is not a viable option for most people. Our roads, our jobs, and our whole urban infrastructure are set up in ways that render it virtually impossible for people to get along in their daily activities by walking or cycling, and public transport is inadequate or nonexistent in most places. Under these circumstances, it is not enough for us to say that people should make personal choices that are compatible with the environment. We need to organize politically to create the social structures—public transport, intercity train systems, flexible work routines, new forms of urban planning and land development, and so on—which will enable a greater number of people actually to make those choices.

This same point bears onto a lot of other issues as well. You can tell someone to “shop green,” for instance, but things aren’t set up for most people to do this. There aren’t the appropriate labels on products to distinguish “green” products from others on the shelf; or, perhaps, these products aren’t even available on the shelves of local stores, or are too expensively priced for people to afford. Ultimately, these are all political issues, so people will need to address the broader structures of power in some way before they can get more meaningful environmental choices.

Looking Forward

DS: In an article that was first published in *Monthly Review* and later reprinted as a chapter in your book [*Ecology Against Capitalism*](#), you draw attention to what you call “the limits of environmentalism without class.” Why, in your opinion, does the contemporary environmental movement need to reengage with the question of social class?

JBF: The piece that you mention was written in the early 1990s at the time of the so-called spotted owl crisis in the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest. At that time, the strategy of the most influential environmental organizations involved was to adopt a very narrow, single-issue approach to the conflict. Basically, their position was that they stood for nature—that it was their sole concern to protect the ancient forests, and it wasn’t their business to address the effect this might have on forestry workers or the economic conditions of the communities in which they lived. I sat down with somebody who was doing lobbying in Washington, D.C. on this issue, and he explicitly told me that, from the point of view of his organization, the environmental position would only be weakened by any mention of the economic situation of workers. For him, the job of environmentalists was simply to draw the line over protecting the forest.

The downside of adopting a strategy like this is that you leave the workers who actually have some interest in maintaining the environment, yet still have to worry about their jobs and livelihood, with no choice but to join up with management and adopt a common industrial front against ecology. In the case of the spotted owl crisis, even though workers had been in conflict with the major lumber companies in the Pacific Northwest over wages and other labor issues, environmentalists left them with no choice but to join with

the owners against what they saw as something that threatened their jobs. In this context, the “wise use movement” in the West gathered tremendous steam and was really able to exploit the discontent of workers, even though it was being funded by capital and promoting capital’s interests above all else. This political alliance between workers and industry was one of the main reasons that environmental legislation got pushed back so much across the West.

My main point here is that if environmentalists adopt a single-issue approach, then they will simply drive workers into the arms of capital. To be politically effective and to connect with a broader base, they need to confront the issue of class. Most people in capitalist society are working class, and the environmental movement isn’t likely to get very far if it gets too middle- or upper-class in its orientation, or simply ignores class issues and says that the fate of laid-off workers should be left to the sanctions of the market. Environmentalists need to avoid presenting people with a stark choice between protecting the environment and protecting the means by which they live. Instead, they need to have a political program that addresses the social and material needs of workers at the same time that it strives to protect the natural environment. This would help to develop a common labor-environmentalist political strategy that is capable of promoting real change.

DS: Toward the end of your book *The Vulnerable Planet*, you make an appeal for what you call “the socialization of nature”—a political goal that to some extent seems like a simple play on the traditional left objective of socializing the economy. For many environmentalists, however, this term might initially set off alarm bells, and be taken to imply the ultimate subordination of nature to human social ends. Could you explain this term for us a bit further?

JBF: The dominant thrust nowadays is toward what might be called the privatization of nature. Today’s global economy is increasingly turning everything in the natural world into a private commodity to be bought and sold on the market—water, forests, plant species, and even (with the advent of pollution permits) the atmosphere itself. This tendency toward the privatization of nature is enormously destructive, and accelerates the kinds of environmental problems that I’ve argued are endemic to capitalism.

The socialization of nature is something else entirely. In my view, the more that nature is placed under the protection of people in general through democratic processes that determine the rules of sustainability, the better things are going to be. When we turn nature over to capital, we are opening it up to forms of private control and exploitation that are largely unaccountable to the collective goal of sustainability.

If you turn over an area of forest to private interests, for instance, then the public has no say over it anymore. Our public forests today may be in bad shape in many ways, but they still compare quite favorably to private forests, which practically don’t exist anymore. If you look at where the private land is in the Pacific Northwest, you’ll notice that all of the old growth forests have been cut down and replaced with tree plantations where young trees are grown and cut down as quickly as possible. This is an industrial

form of production and harvesting that has nothing to do with maintaining the integrity of forests or the health of the ecosystem at all. The reason we have any real forests left is because they are under public control, because they have been socialized.

Today, advocates of privatization are extremely prejudiced against the state, tending to equate any mention of “socialization” with Soviet-style totalitarianism, statism, and so on. They tend to overlook the fact that the state can take many different forms—indeed, that democracy itself cannot exist without a state. If everything is turned over to private interests, then the democratic public sphere disappears, and all that you’re left with is a number of private actors selfishly pursuing their own private ends. In this celebrated era of deregulation and privatization, we sometimes forget that many of the most basic goods that we all enjoy today—from tap water, to electricity, sanitation, parks, and so on—were not initially provided by business, but by public agencies responding to democratic demands. Similarly, the basic environmental protections that we have today were initiated and implemented by democratic public bodies, and only reluctantly acceded to by the capitalist class.

When we turn everything over to private interests, the majority of the population loses its ability to protect either nature or itself against the will of the powerful minority that owns and controls the great bulk of social resources. In contrast, when we bring something into the public sphere, we place it under a form of political control in which democratic principles can apply. In this sense, the socialization of nature represents a democratic and anticapitalist strategy, one that does relate directly to socialism. Socialism advocates the fullest extension of democratic public control, believing that the majority of ordinary people should have a say over how collective resources are used. I think that this is the direction in which we need to move if we are to change our relationship to the natural world and achieve genuine sustainability.