

Book Review

***The Ecological Revolution Making Peace with the Planet*, by John Bellamy Foster. New York: Monthly Press Review, 2009. \$17.95 US., paper. ISBN-13: 9781583671795. Pages: 1-328.**

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John Bellamy Foster's book is a critical treatise of the ecological crisis facing our planet and a scholarly contribution to the literature of political ecology. The book's primary aim is to provide "resources for a journey of hope" towards an eco-social revolution, while we stand at a crucial point regarding humanity's relation to the earth. The book is divided in three parts. Part one, entitled "The Planetary Crisis" begins by pointing out the ecological crisis that is looming upon the planet and briefly discusses the unsuccessful endeavors for addressing this crisis. Particular attention has been paid to efforts undertaken as part of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the Johannesburg Summit, which are seen as failed attempts to achieve a sustainable future. Foster argues that sustainable development is increasingly seen as an opportunity for business, thus environmental reform is to be achieved through market-driven models. This part of the book reads easily and is rich in information about the inconsistencies that have led to questionable environmental policies and the failure to achieve environmental reform on a large scale.

In the second part entitled "Marx's Ecology", Foster sets the ground for theorizing the ecological revolution. While its theoretical richness cannot be addressed here in its entirety, it is crucial to focus on the concept of 'metabolic rift'. Foster explains that instead of seeing Marx's work as blind towards nature, his work needs to be seen as providing a powerful analysis for the ecological crisis of our time. Foster achieves this through an in-depth discussion of Marx's later work on political economy, especially by revealing his discussion of 'the Second Agricultural Revolu-

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tion' and by unfolding Marx's inspiration with the work of German chemist Justus von Liebig (*Organic Chemistry in Its Application to Agriculture and Physiology*, 1840; *Animal Chemistry*, 1842; *Letters on Modern Agriculture*, 1859). For Foster, Marx employed the concept of 'metabolic rift' in order to "capture the material estrangement of human beings in capitalist society from the natural conditions of their existence" (p.180). Such discussion reveals that although Marx did not attempt to provide a treatment of all ecological problems, his work was not 'ecologically blind'. Indeed, Foster rightly maintains, that Marx's work "constitutes a possible starting point for a comprehensive sociology of the environment" (p.196). Foster establishes that Marx argued and wrote as if nature mattered, and that is the crux of his contribution to sociology as a field, as well as to the movements for an ecological revolution.

The third part entitled "Ecology and Revolution", presents an integration of theory with practice for establishing the argument that an ecological revolution needs to originate from 'the social' realm. Thus, it is through a social revolution that secures the provision of basic human needs that an ecological civilization can be achieved. In this way Foster maintains that the human relation to nature lies at the heart of the transition to socialism. This identification along with the discussion of the 'metabolic rift' found in Marx's work constitutes a significant contribution to socialist theory, which can serve as the starting point for the theorization of the transition from capitalism to socialism. This can also serve in understanding the struggles for sustainable society and human development that are taking place in the periphery of the capitalist system, which need to be seen as examples for fundamental change at the centre. In the last two chapters Foster broadly discusses examples from Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil and India as "islands of hope" for the establishment of the human metabolism with nature along with practices of human development, instead of solely economic development. Although these are important cases for illustrating the transitional steps from capitalism to an ecological society, the discussion is somewhat insufficient. While expecting the argument for the ecological revolution to acquire more depth towards the end of the book, the reader encounters a rather romanticized and superficial treatment of the struggles for sustainable human development that have taken place in the periphery of the capitalist world system.

One further problem with the book is that Foster spends a lot of time trying to tie together theory and practice while dealing with some complicated theoretical questions and not-so-easy to sort out practical issues. This has resulted in often repetitive and overburdened sections, rather than providing more straightforward treatment of the practical and theoretical issues. Better editing would have assisted the reader to get a clearer understanding of the dynamics of the socio-ecological

revolution presented in the book. This, coupled with the fact that the book is a collection of articles turned into chapters, demonstrates its lack of focus and at times makes it a difficult read.

Despite these problems Foster's book does offer an excellent discussion of some key concepts of Marx's work regarding the metabolism of humanity with nature and relates them to the problematique of eco-social sustainability. Foster's main achievement is to draw together a difficult body of theory with urging political questions and convincingly argue that it is high time ecological crises were addressed via a socialist, as opposed to a capitalist, approach. The root of addressing environmental crises for Foster involves a "civilizational shift" that would be revolutionary for culture, economy and society. Foster compellingly reveals that questions surrounding the capacity of the capitalist mode of production to wrought environmental destruction have been treated in the classical works of critical political economy. In this way, Foster's book is an important addition to the scholarly works, which assert that the work of Marx, especially his later political economy, is characterized by an understanding that nature (non-human nature) matters. Hence, the genesis of the questionable sustainability of capitalism can be discerned via Marx's discussion of 'the Second Agricultural Revolution'. Another disciplinary contribution is for the field of sociology. Through his discussion of Marx, one of the classical thinkers of the field, and by unfolding the 'metabolic rift' as well as society – nature relation, Foster reveals that theorization, particularly in environmental sociology, can be done on a more theoretically solid ground. More generally, from Foster's argument it can be discerned that in the face of ecological crises we need to think and act beyond disciplinary boundaries. He asserts that a "sociology of the environment" must recognize and consider changes that take place in the social and natural realms, as well as their mutual interaction. Thus, social transformation cannot be understood without ecological transformation and vice versa.