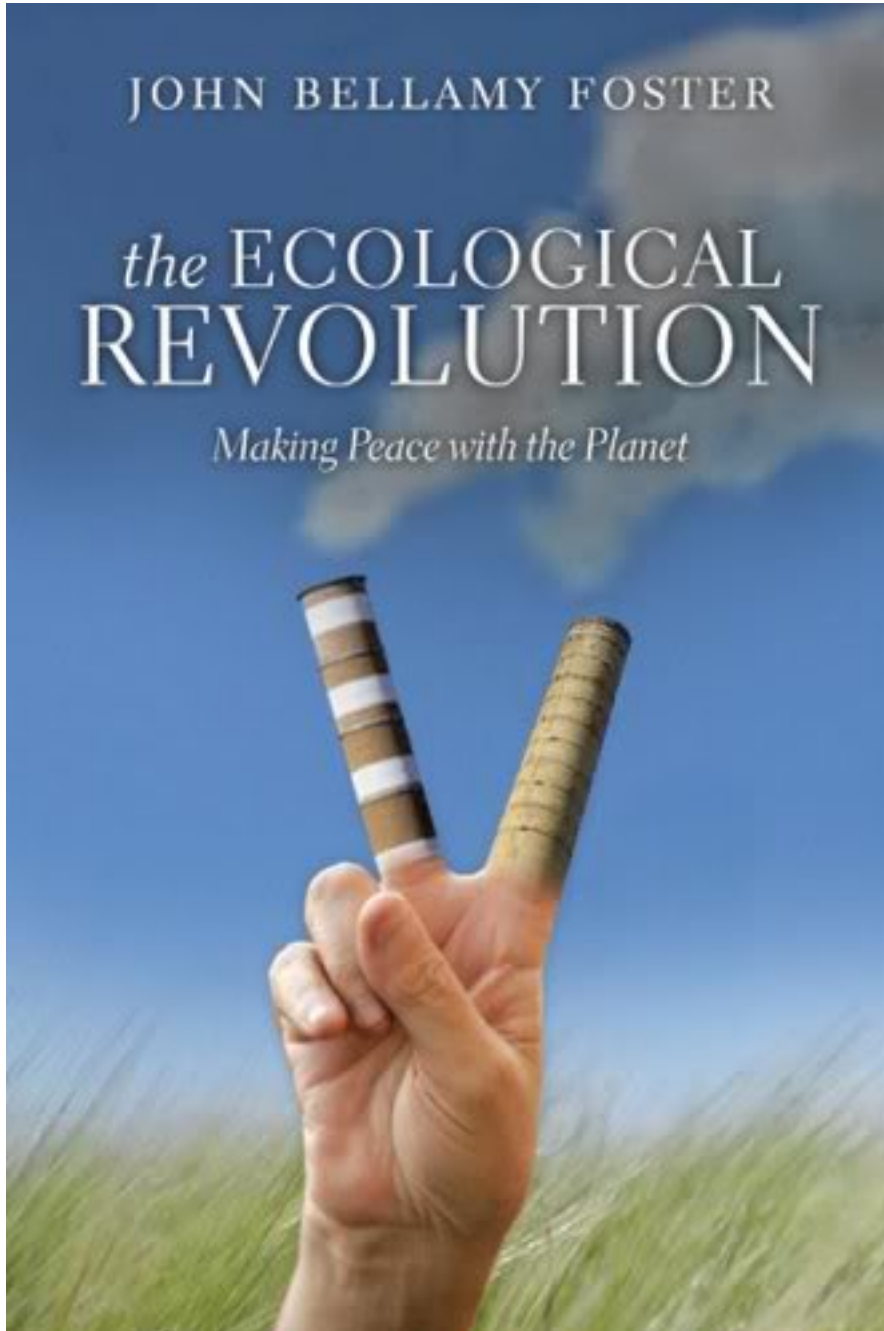


## John Bellamy Foster on 'Marx's Ecology' and 'The Ecological Revolution'

John Bellamy Foster interviewed by Aleix Bombila



John Bellamy Foster is editor of the US socialist journal [Monthly Review](#) and author of [Marx's Ecology](#) and

[The Ecological Revolution](#)

Aleix Bombila writes for

[En Lucha](#)

(Spain). This interview first appeared in English at

[MRZine](#)

**En Lucha:** In your book *Marx's Ecology* you argue that Marxism has a lot to offer to the ecologist movement. What kind of united work can be established between Marxists and ecologists?

**John Bellamy Foster:** I think it is important to recognise that Marxists and ecologists are not entirely different groups. Of course it is true that there have been Reds who have been anti-ecological and Greens who have been anti-Marxist. But it is not uncommon for the two to overlap, and increasingly to converge. Many socialists are environmentalists and many environmentalists are socialists. Indeed, there is a sense in which Marxism and ecology, both classically and today, lead to the same conclusion. For Marx, the goal was the creation of a society in which the metabolic relation between humanity and nature (i.e. production) was rationally regulated by the associated producers. The original title of my book that you refer to was supposed to be *Marx and Ecology*, but I changed it to *Marx's Ecology* because of the depth of Marx's ecological conceptions.

I would argue that a critical Marxist approach, especially in our time, requires an ecological worldview, while a critical human ecology requires an anti-capitalist and ultimately socialist orientation (i.e., a Marxist one). In terms of united work that Marxists and ecologists can share, I would say social justice and environmental sustainability: saving humanity and saving the Earth. You can't expect to achieve one without the other, and neither is possible under the existing system.

Probably the strongest single voice for an ecological relation in the world today is [Evo Morales](#), the socialist (and Indigenous) president of Bolivia. After the failed Copenhagen conference on climate change, Fidel Castro said that we used to think we were in a struggle simply to

determine the society of the future, but we now know we are in a struggle for survival. We have reached a point where historical materialists are taking global leadership in defining the ecological needs of humanity.

**The struggle against climate change looks kind of abstract at first sight. How can we organise campaigns against climate change with a real impact? Who should promote them?**

Climate change, and the planetary ecological crisis as a whole, which is much bigger, is the greatest material threat that civilisation, and indeed humanity, has ever confronted. We are facing, if we don't change course, the demise of the Earth as a habitable planet for most of today's living species. But, as you say, it seems abstract. People can't feel it because it is not reflected consistently in the short-term weather conditions they experience on a daily or even a seasonal basis. Moreover, it is not a problem that grows gradually and smoothly, but rather one that will accelerate with all sorts of tipping points, issuing in irreversible changes.

So time is extremely short, and it requires a certain degree of education as to what is happening. Scientists are now almost unanimous on the threat, if not on all the details, but they do not have a direct line to the population. There are very few actual authoritative global warming deniers and their scientific claims, such as they are, been refuted again and again, but because of the power of the capitalist class, which sees any action to avert the problem as a threat to its immediate interests, the denial view is constantly amplified in the corporate media. Ordinary people are thus left uncertain as to what to think. Besides, they are hit with other material problems that seem more immediate: economic stagnation, the current extreme downturn, and the destructive effects of neoliberal policy. Workers are seeing their economic standard of living decline and are worried about their jobs; increasing numbers are unemployed and in poverty. So it is hard to concentrate on something as seemingly nebulous as climate change.

If we are looking for a massive revolt from below in this area I believe that it will emerge first not at the centre but at the periphery of the capitalist world. [Toynbee](#) in his studies of history used to talk about an internal and an external proletariat. On climate change, as well as in the revolts against capitalism in general, it is the external proletariat in the periphery of the capitalist world economy that will undoubtedly take the leading role. I have pointed in recent writings to the possibility of what I have called an

["environmental proletariat"](#)

-- for whom resistance to environmental conditions broadly, and not simply industrial conditions, is the defining struggle. Those most oppressed in the world, who have nothing to lose, are to be

found predominantly in third world regions. So this is where the environmental proletariat also is mainly to be found. This is especially evident in the effect that sea level rise will have on the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta in Bangladesh and India and on the low-lying fertile areas of the Indian Ocean and China Sea -- Kerala in India, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia.

Some areas, like the low-lying delta of the Pearl River in China, correspond to the areas of fastest development (in this case Guangdong industrial region from Shenzhen to Guangzhou), and some of the sharpest class contradictions. So the world epicenters of environmental and class struggle may overlap. There are all sorts of signs -- as in the water, hydrocarbon, and coca wars in Bolivia, which helped bring a socialist and Indigenous-based political movement to power -- that the material bases of social struggle is being transformed, raising issues that are more all-encompassing.

Even in the centre of the system (the internal proletariat), there are a lot of ongoing struggles by environmentalists, and particularly the youth-based climate justice movement. Although there is no sign of a revolt from below from workers at present, and even though [the labour movement seems to be entirely dormant in the United States in particular](#) in the context of worsening economic (and environmental) conditions, there is hope that community-based, labour-environmental struggles will generate a new context for change. It is to be hoped that something like an environmental proletariat will eventually emerge in the centre too. If one reads classic works like Engels's [The Condition of the Working Class in England](#) one gets the sense in which environmental struggles were crucial to the making of the English working class in the classical era, in ways that belie a narrow productivist vision.

The truth is that when it comes to the dual contradictions represented by the economic and environmental failures of the system, it is only socialists that are able effectively to bring these issues together. Only historical materialists fully embody a theory and a practice that recognises that these are not separate issues but have a common basis in the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, I think we are increasingly seeing a convergence of socialist and ecological visions of the future, in a way that leads in a much more revolutionary direction than we have ever seen before. But we should not be blindly optimistic. This also requires organisation. And there are great dangers, such as the growth of ecofascism, and the delaying tactics of those in power that could spell "the common ruin of the contending classes."

**How can we foster environmental justice without prejudicing the working class?**

One might as well ask: How can we *not* foster environmental justice without prejudicing the working class? One of the first works on environmental justice, as I have already suggested, was Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which focused on how the working class was subject to toxic living conditions and the consequences in terms of health, looking at how this has affected class divisions and urban structure. Such concerns were part of the working-class struggle in the beginning.

Environmental justice also includes health and safety within factories -- and in a broader sense than this is usually understood, encompassing such issues as length of working day, intensity of hours, etc. It is only the growth of a business-oriented trade union movement, and its segmentation from other working-class issues under contemporary capitalist systems of legal/political regulation, that has allowed people to think that the labour movement in particular and class struggle in general centres on a very restrictive set of issues, separated from environmental justice, which is in reality the measure of how inequality affects people in the multiple material domains of life.

Of course environmental injustice in the United States is understandably seen as related to race perhaps even more than class, since its greatest impact is on those individuals and communities that are subject to environmental racism. Toxic wastes, as is well known, are more commonly dumped in communities of colour. One then sometimes runs into the misconception that this is a race and not a class issue for that very reason. Often implicit in this is the false notion that the working class is white, and so, if the problem is one that primarily affects American Indians, blacks, Latinos, Asians, then it is not a class issue.

But of course the working class in the United States is predominantly made up of so-called "minority races". There is no sense in which the working class is a white working class, as is commonly supposed (and as contemporary whiteness studies teach us the whole issue of "white" needs examination). Environmental justice is thus a race and class (and indeed a gender) issue. It raises issues that the contemporary labour movement, with its limited "bargaining" position and the racial divides that it has often helped perpetuate, is not very well equipped to deal with, but that a socialist working-class movement could much more easily address.

**Are taxes on polluting industries a solution?**

If you mean an ultimate solution, the answer is No. The only real solution is to get rid of capitalism and put an egalitarian, sustainable society, run by the associated producers, in its place. But we have to face the fact that the environmental problem, including climate change, is accelerating, that this is a question of survival for humanity and most species on the earth. The time in which to act if we want to avoid irreversible environmental decline is incredibly short, with only a generation or so in which to implement a drastic change of course. That at least is what science is telling us at present. Under these circumstances we need both short-term radical responses and a longer-term ecological revolution. The first needs to help promote the conditions for the second.

The immediate, short-term response requires, I am convinced, [a carbon tax of the kind proposed by James Hansen](#) : a progressively increasing tax imposed at well head, mine shaft, or point of entry with 100 per cent of the revenue going back to the population on a monthly basis. The point of this set-up, as Hansen says, is to make sure that the carbon tax is imposed as much as possible at the point of production and falls on those with the largest carbon footprints (mostly the rich), with the majority of the population gaining from the distribution of the revenue from the tax, since they have less-than-average per-capita footprints.

Neither capital nor the governments controlled by capital would have their hands on the revenue, which would flow directly to the population. Implementing this in the kind of society that we have would of course be difficult. But once it was understood as having the effect of both protecting the earth (by making the price of carbon higher) and generally redistributing income toward those at the bottom of the society, it would gain strong popular support.

The truth is that as long as we are in a capitalist society a key means of controlling a pollutant -- and carbon dioxide has unfortunately become that -- is going to be increasing its price. More direct political forms of regulation should of course be used as well. For example, we need simply to ban the building of coal-fired plants as long as sequestration technology doesn't exist (and at present there are all sorts of obstacles), and existing coal-fired plants need to be rapidly phased out. To accomplish this on the necessary scale, however, requires a general ecological revolution affecting what we produce and consume and how our society is organised.

**Is a collective solution to the ecological crisis possible within this system (renewable energies, improvement of public transport, cessation of big infrastructures, etc.)?**

Again, there is no collective solution *within the system*. But we can promote collective solutions *from within the system*

, which, going against its logic, will play a part in the transition to another, people-controlled system. The new society will emerge from the womb of the old.

Fred Magdoff and I have discussed the problem of capitalism and the environment in detail in an article that is appearing in the March 2010 issue of *Monthly Review*, entitled "What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism." The basic point, which needs elaboration of course, is the fact that the regime of capital is one of self-expanding value.

Capitalism requires for its very existence constant economic growth and, more explicitly, accumulation of capital. Such a system can clearly be very effective up to a certain point in promoting production and economic development. But it also is very exploitative and ultimately leads to the destruction of the environmental conditions of existence. The only real social and ecological solution is a society not focused on accumulation or economic growth per se, but on sustainable human development. No matter what measures you introduce to modernise capitalism ecologically, the system requires a constant growth of the treadmill of production. If we substitute public for private transportation, introduce renewable energies, and adopt other collective measures, it can help. But these themselves tend to be limited by the accumulation goal of the system. Reliance on renewable resources, for example, is important. But it requires a system that uses them only at the level at which they can be renewed. Capital pushes beyond all such boundaries.

What this means is not that we back off from promoting more social, collective, public solutions. But we need to recognise that going in that direction invariably means going against the logic of the system, so it requires radical organisation. What we are talking about is trying to create, in part from within capitalism, the infrastructure for a different kind of society. With constant pressure from below some things can be achieved, as long as they don't impinge substantially on the accumulation drive of the system.

But if accumulation itself is threatened capital fights back, and small victories are likely to be reversed. The only answer -- no longer to be seen simply as a question of justice but also one of survival -- is to push beyond what capital is willing to accept, i.e., to promote human and collective needs beyond the so-called "market system". In that case, you are talking, if you take it far enough to make a real difference, about an ecological and social revolution and the transition to another kind of society.

**Some social movements believe it is possible to live apart from capitalism. Do you think this is possible, or does it just lead to the atomisation of the opposition?**

The US socialist [Scott Nearing](#) , who wrote a regular column for many years in *Monthly Review* , was one of the leaders of the self-sufficiency and back-to-the-land movement. There is no doubt that this kind of separation of oneself from the main logic of the system and its effects (a kind of living apart from the system) constitutes a form of passive resistance (still a form of resistance).

Throughout history human beings, faced by repressive systems, have returned to the land, and cultivated their own gardens, so to speak. This can be a way of healing, regrouping, etc. Many of those who have gone in this general direction have pioneered in alternative forms of agriculture, including organic farming, community-supported agriculture.

We should not underestimate the degree to which such actions can sometimes create alternatives crucial to the development of a new society, within the various interstices of the system. But the real struggle to create a new society requires in addition an active resistance and political organisation: a direct revolt against the existing relations of production. So the new strengths that were gained during a period of retreat have to become a part of an active resistance. Complete withdrawal in a globalised capitalist system is largely an illusion. It is interesting how Nearing himself combined his life of self-sufficiency with continual, active resistance. He worked it from both ends. Today we need people who are active in their resistance. If they can combine this with various ways of freeing themselves from the rat race, so much the better.

**The degrowth movement champions individual and collective initiatives in the search for alternatives to capitalism. What is your opinion about it? How can we decrease globally within the capitalist system?**

Decrease globally *within* capitalism? We *can't*. Capitalism is all about accumulation. It is a grow-or-die system and on an increasingly global scale. When economic growth, particularly the growth of profits, is not taking place, the system goes into a crisis, as at present. This results in massive unemployment. There are a lot of good things to be said about [the "degrowth movement," as articulated particularly in Paris in April 2008](#) . But it is based on a voluntaristic approach to decrease consumption, and on the unreal assumption that you can have a stationary state (that is a no-growth economy), as envisioned



by

[John Stuart Mill](#)

in the 19th century, somehow in the context of the present system. This is simply a misunderstanding as to the nature of capitalism. As Joseph Schumpeter wrote, a no-growth capitalism is a

[contradictio in adjecto](#)

It is certainly true that we need a new economic structure focused on enough and not more. An overall reduction in economic scale on the world level, particularly in the rich countries, could be accompanied by progress in sustainable human development, improving the real conditions of humanity by moving from possessive individualism to non-possessive humanism-collectivism. But this would require a socialist economy to make it possible (not inevitable).

**If the alternative to capitalism is a democratically planned economy, how should this work so as to include environmental issues?**

I think we need to remember Marx's warning in *Capital* about writing ["recipes for the cook-shops of the future."](#)

It would be a mistake to try to write an actual blueprint for a socialist society, including one that incorporated environmental issues. Yet, I think that Paul Burkett has demonstrated in a brilliant article on

["Marx's Vision of Sustainable Human Development"](#)

in the October 2005 issue of *Monthly Review*

that Marx's notion of communism was one of sustainable human development, and that it is indeed only in those terms that we can understand what Marx's conception of a society of freely associated producers regulating their metabolism with nature was all about.

Hugo Chávez has defined the struggle for socialism in the 21st century in terms of ["the elementary triangle of socialism"](#)

According to this view, derived from Marx, socialism consists of: (1) social ownership; (2) social production organised by workers; and (3) satisfaction of communal needs.

In my view, one can also speak of an "elementary triangle of ecology", derived directly from

Marx, which takes the struggle to a deeper level. This can be defined as: (1) social use, not ownership, of nature; (2) rational regulation by the associated producers of the metabolism between human beings and nature; and (3) the satisfaction of communal needs -- not only of present but also future generations. All of this is spelled out in detail at the end of the introduction to my book *The Ecological Revolution*, as well as in the final chapters of that book.

**Finally, why should we read your last book, *The Ecological Revolution*?**

The opening words of the preface to *The Ecological Revolution* state: "My premise in this book is that we have reached a turning point in the human relation to the earth: all hope for the future of this relationship is now either revolutionary or it is false."

The reason to read the *Ecological Revolution* is to begin to approach this question, which is now obviously the most important question facing humanity as we go forward into the future.