Can Marxism in International Relations Offer Solutions to the Eco-Crisis?

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The destruction of earth's life systems under capitalism "is arguably the most fundamental challenge facing humanity today" (Benton, 2018). Persistent warnings from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) about global temperature rises in the Anthropocene (age of humans) are evidence that a new framework is needed to conceptualise the issue.

Climate change has been neglected in the field of IR, this is particularly evident from the lack of related journal articles in the field (Underdal, 2017, p. 170). Karl Marx, regarded as the leading critic of capitalism, has nonetheless been labelled as insensitive to international climate and environmental issues (Bellamy Foster and Burkett, 2001, p. 451) with disagreement amongst scholars (Breen, 2014, p. 6). Consequently, twenty years ago an 'ecosocialist' approach may have seemed unconventional.

Having explored ecological aspects and interpretations of Marx, I have a certain level of sympathy with 'revisionists'. Although nature was foundational to Marx, reconceptualisation of his concepts may be beneficial in order to address environmental challenges that he may have struggled to conceive of (Grundmann, 1991a, p.103 in Breen, 2014, p.1). Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) has been regarded as a promising Marxian IR approach yet it still ignores ecological issues.

I aim to outline various eco-criticisms of Marxism and respond to them by demonstrating that nature and ecology are foundational for Marx. I hope to demonstrate that incorporating environmental issues into UCD could yield some explanations and solutions for the ongoing climate crisis.

Marx's Theory: Prometheanism of the Highest Kind or an Ecological Foundation?

Marx's work originated 200 years ago (Barry, 1999, p.260) when the Anthropocene was not as strongly linked to the environmental crisis. Ecology in this period was often viewed as anti-industrial or anti-enlightenment (ibid.). These issues are often highlighted by eco-critics of Marx who was not aided, they say, by the fact that his work lacked a coherent definition of nature (Smith, 2008, p. 50).

One main criticism held that Marx advocated for the domination of nature by man, undermining the emancipatory goals of Marxism (Barry, 1999, p. 261). Many argue that such domination could only lead to 'imminent disaster' (Smith, 2008, p.10). This derives from the view that human domination of nature does not consider natural limits (Bellamy Foster, 2015b), the effects of pollution or the resulting negative prospects for human survival (Dale, 2018). Even ecosocialists, such as Benton and Gorz, argued that Marx lacked an understanding of sustainability (Bellamy Foster, 2015, p. 5).

Consequently, Marx's work has been accused of 'Prometheanism' whereby industrialism and human progress are prioritised over natural limits (Saito, 2016). This suggests that humans can not live in a sustainable balance with nature (Ely, 1988, p. 111). Benton (2018) claims that Marx 'celebrates' control over nature and its resulting productivity, pursuing socialism merely to share the spoils. Such criticisms are based on passages such as: "The

bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together." (Marx & Engels, 1976, p.489 in Saito, 2016) which suggest ignorance of capitalist ecological destruction (Saito, 2016). Critics also cite Marx's reference to nature as man's 'inorganic body' as the reason for this conclusion (Clark, 1989 in Bellamy Foster & Burkett, 2001, p.454).

Eco-socialists may not regard human domination as disastrous, but associate this with capitalism as a system. Capitalism, they say, has a rapacious profit motive which obliges humanity to expend resources to compete with one another, making it unsustainable (Barry, 1999, p.262). Ecosocialists are more likely to be sympathetic with Marx's critique of capitalism but are likely to see the need for amendments to Marxist theory to address environmental issues (ibid., p. 259). Such approaches became more prolific in the 1990s as proponents suggested that Marx's critiques had a 'deep ecological context' (Bellamy Foster, 2015, p. 5)

The Ecological Marx: A Counter-Criticism

Firstly, neither Marx nor Engels considered humanity to be above nature, but a part of it in a dialectic (Dale, 2018). According to Benton (2018), this overcomes the philosophical tradition of separating humans from nature. Such an approach is visible throughout Marx's work with passages such as: "he [humanity] acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature" (Marx, 1976, p.283). Eco-critics seem to ignore this key context which implies that man is imbued in nature; humans must relate to nature to acquire materials needed for survival (Smith & O'Keefe, 2006, p.32) e.g. plants, which in turn rely on the sun and soil (Marx, 1975[1844], p.390) and therefore man is inseparable from nature (ibid., p.329). By referring to 'inorganic nature' Marx merely meant that it was physically outside of the human body (ibid., p.327). Marx's Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (EPM) (1844) are imbued with ecological values but criticised for referring to 'the inorganic body of man' (Bellamy Foster and Burkett, 2001, p.451).

The assumption that Marx's humanity is parasitic on nature, may have more to do with the wider field of IR. A positivist tradition dominates, suggesting that nature and humanity are separate and should be studied separately (Smith, 2008, p.30). As Marx noted: "The idea of one basis for life and another for science is from the very outset a lie" (Marx, 1975(1844), p.355). This suggests that current IR acts to legitimate nature's subjugation (Smith, 2008, p.28) and capitalism, not human nature, should be linked to environmental degradation (ibid, p.29).

Unsustainable Capitalism

Rather than revealing an unsustainable organic/inorganic relationship, Marx intended this to inform criticisms of capitalism. Marx was, in fact, a critic of the domination of nature for capitalist growth (Dale, 2018). However, this was not Marx's exclusive aim in *Capital*, which may explain why his conception of nature appears fragmented (Smith, 2008, p.51). Nevertheless, a critique of capitalism required analysis of its treatment of nature and Marx provided this (ibid).

The concept of 'metabolic rift' serves this purpose. Marx defined labour and industry as mediators between man and nature (Bellamy Foster, 2015, p.2) in order to meet fundamental needs, resulting in a type of 'metabolism' between the two (Marx, 1976, p. 283). In the process, other use values are returned to nature (Smith, 2008, p.54). For example, Marx was heavily influenced by chemist Justus von Liebig's analysis of soil degradation under 19th century British agriculture (Bellamy Foster, 2015, p.2).

Capitalism is based on subsistence, not exchange (Castree, 2015, p.5) and this unbalances the metabolism. Individual capitalists accumulate ever more resources to compete (Smith & O'Keefe, 2006, p.32) leading to a rift between man and nature. Nature is treated as a commodity in pursuit of growth under capitalism (Smith, 2008, p.15), rather than an essential for the satiation of needs, which was a central theme for Marx (Benton, 2018).

Critics have misconstrued this observation, claiming that it proves Marx's acceptance of the production of nature for capitalist ends (Bellamy Foster & Burkett, 2001, p.455). However, this ignores that Marx was describing capitalism in order to critique it (ibid.).

Marx distinguished between exchange value (imbuing commodities with value based on associated labour time) and use value (valuing resources for survival) (Smith & O'Keefe, 2006, p.34), which allowed him to come to this conclusion. By prioritising exchange value capitalist nature is fetishized (Smith, 2008, p.45); acquiring imposed monetary or exchange value regardless of its real use value (Elmar Altvater 1993, p.193 in Castree, 2015, p.9). Natural boundaries are treated by capitalism as barriers to profit to be overcome and not absolutes or limits (Bellamy Foster, 2018) and Malm and Hornborg (2014, p.64) observe a "disjunction between exchange values and physics."

A related consequence of this is alienation of man from man (Berki, 1980, p.93) as a 'species being' and man from nature as observed by Marx in EPM (Benton, 2018). Removing means of subsistence (nature) (Berki, 1980, p.98) necessitates the sale of labour power for survival (Smith, 2008, p.69) and man's product becomes the property of another (ibid., p.63). For example, common land closure (Benton, 2018) or separation of labour between town and country can be linked to threatened soil fertility (O'Connor, 1989, p. 4).

Urbanisation is perhaps a more modern manifestation, concentrating people and production into areas where many struggle to own shelter let alone natural means of production. Such a phenomenon threatens a sustainable organic/inorganic metabolism (Bellamy Foster and Burkett, 2001, p. 459) and humanity's ability to "bequeath it [earth] in an improved state to succeeding generations" (Karl Marx, 1976[1867], p.637 in Bellamy Foster, 2015, p.3).

Far from being Promethean, the above concepts give Marx a unique perspective on contemporary ecological crises (Bellamy Foster, 2015, p.3). However, they will need to be applied to modern, capitalist conditions. Such a task may be achievable by utilising Uneven and Combined Development (UCD) theory alongside an ecological sensitivity as climate change is effective on, and often discussed at, an international level, and humanity as a whole does not contribute to, or experience its effects, equally.

Uneven and Combined Development: An Ecological Framework?

UCD was initially conceived by Leon Trotsky to explain Russia's unusual socio-economic development and implications for a socialist revolution (Tansel, 2015, p. 15). In Ronseal-like fashion[1], UCD does exactly what it says on the tin, and more.

Unevenness is described by Trotsky as the most general law of capitalist development (Robinson, 2010, p.73). Industry, banking, commerce, wealth, consumption (O'Connor, 1989, p.1) are not equally advanced everywhere and such unevenness can explain the simultaneous existence of differing societies (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 17).

This is because combined development occurs, whereby an entity's development is characterised by "integrating aspects of the developed world with the 'underdeveloped'" (O'Connor, 1989, p.2), creating unique and peculiar development paths (Trotsky, 1932, p.4). Why reinvent the wheel when one can acquire the blueprints elsewhere and develop the rest of the car? This would be an example of Trotsky's 'privilege of economic backwardness' (ibid., p.5).

A multiplicity of societies spurs accelerated development due to what Trotsky termed the 'external whip of necessity' (Tansel, 2015, p.16). By observing developments in other societies and copying them, societies can compete and avoid relative regression (Rosenberg, 2016, p.18); a necessity under capitalism (Smith, 2008, p.8). One necessary consequence is the existence of a space outside of the state, where it competes with other entities- the 'international' (Rosenberg, 2010, p.170 in Tansel, 2015, p.6).

Arguably, the international is the unique gift of UCD to IR, perhaps explaining its recent revival. UCD demonstrates capitalist development to be inherently international (Tansel, 2015, p.15); because societies interact, they co-exist outside of themselves (Rosenberg, 2016, p.17). This suggests that Marxist IR can and does exist and that international theory is no longer marked by 'intellectual and moral poverty' (Rosenberg, 1996, p.4).

This allows theory to transcend 'methodological nationalism' (Rosenberg, 2016, p.19). For example, Realism dominates IR and posits states as self-contained entities (ibid.). In this way, IR clashes with Marxist theory on the division of humanity, assuming that it is separated into states as opposed to advocating unity (Berki, 1971, p. 80).

Nothing about UCD suggests our analysis should centre on states at all, but rather the international (Anievas 2008, p.200 in Robinson, 2010, p.73) and class relations within the international. Rosenberg in particular views UCD as preceding capitalism (Rosenberg, 2016, p.2) and the state as an imposed organising entity (Rosenberg, 2013, p.594 in Brophy, 2018). It may be possible, under a framework of UCD, to conceive of exchanges outside the state. First, it is important to assess how UCD has been applied to ecological issues, and whether this application is adequate.

UCD's Environmental Explanations

UCD has traditionally failed to address environmental issues (O'Connor, 1989, p.1) and their international implications. Writing on UCD in the twentieth century, Rosenberg (2016, pp.27-28) acknowledges its potential for conflict as less developed nations 'catch up'. In marvelling at the pace of this, enabled by combined development, Rosenberg does not acknowledge environmental consequences. Whilst not necessarily ignored, environmental issues are tangential to UCD. Thus, I argue that the harmonization of ecology and UCD could make an important contribution to IR theory.

O'Connor (1989) has attempted to do just this by applying UCD to environmental issues. He argues that ecological disaster affects the developing world more profoundly (ibid., p.2) and this extends to less prosperous areas of first world countries or 'internal colonies' (ibid., p.4) perhaps due to an inability to adapt. Livelihoods in these areas are more reliant on access to resources, which capitalism is removing, destroying and privatizing, such as land. This is also referred to as ecological imperialism whereby one country exploits others ecologically, i.e. the exploitative agricultural relationship between England and Ireland acknowledged by Marx (1976[1867], p.860 in Bellamy Foster, 2015, p.7).

Underdal (2017, p.171) succinctly states: "increase in greenhouse gas (GHG) atmospheric concentrations may well play a role in causing more devastating floods in one region, more severe droughts in another, and more pleasant living conditions in a third." Evidently, capitalism distributes goods and profit unequally, but this is also the case for ecological risk (Barry, 1999, p.265).

This, alongside O'Connor's analysis, challenges traditional eco-critics who fail to acknowledge that ecological vulnerability is spatially differentiated (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, pp.66-67). They claim that crises do not acknowledge borders and that "there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged (witness the drought in Australia or recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California)" (Chakrabarty, 2009, p.221 in ibid., p.66). In reality, Kim Kardashian and Kanye West really were protected by private firefighters in California while their neighbours' houses burnt down (Madrigal, 2018). Another example of uneven climate change effects can be seen in different levels of damage caused by hurricane Katrina across white versus black neighbourhoods or sea level rise effects in Bangladesh versus in the Netherlands (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, pp. 66-67).

UCD may explain why only a portion of humanity is largely responsible for destroying earth's life systems (Barry, 1999, p. 267). The following equation is commonly used: Impact (I) on the earth is determined by population growth (P), increasing affluence (A), and technological development (T): $I=P\times A\times T$ (Holdren & Ehrlich, 1974, Chertow, 2001 in Underdal, 2017, p.171). The logic follows that population increase is inherently negative (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, p.65). This was popular within the environmental movement of the late 20th century, with many warning of an impending 'population bomb' (Ehrlich, 1970).

However, due to unequal access to natural resources, there exists an unequal depletion of resources. Advanced, capitalist, countries have a small share of the world's population, yet contribute a disproportionately large amount of CO2 emissions (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, p.64) whilst over a billion people have no electricity (ibid., p.65). This suggests that capitalism, rather than humanity, is responsible for degradation (Bellamy Foster, 2015b), reaffirming the need for production and wealth to be redistributed according to 'genuine human requirements' (ibid.).

O'Connor also highlights the division of labour between town and country which, as aforementioned, upsets the metabolic relationship and threatens soil fertility (O'Connor, 1989, p.4). O'Connor (ibid., p.7) concludes that uneven development under capitalism 'has been a disaster for tens of millions of people' while combined development allows

capital to seek the most profitable production method while retaining 'third world' labour conditions (ibid., pp.8-9).

Although making a cursory attempt at giving UCD an ecological perspective, O'Connor (1989) does not fully explore the potential of UCD for this issue. For example, he states that 'combined and uneven development' can explain why differential access to nature leads to uneven experiences of environmental degradation and disasters. This follows a similar 'environmentally deterministic' road taken by Jared Diamond, which has been sharply criticised by the likes of Correia (2013, p.2) who states: "Environmental determinism is not critical environmental politics; it is a bourgeois social theory" (ibid, p.5). UCD has many more profound implications than this regarding nature and the international.

An Ecological UCD

Most ecological critiques of IR claim that nature does not respect national boundaries and thus global ecological processes can't be addressed without transcending the politics of multiplicity. After all, many writings on climate change say it is an international challenge, meaning it can not be tackled unilaterally (Underdal, 2017, p.172), but rather at a higher level; it is an 'international governance challenge' (ibid., p.169). Perhaps the failure of interstate conferences and Councils of Parties (CoPs) to protect the environment (Castree, 2015, p.10) is due to the fact that interests are defined along state lines. This stems from the observation that: "The world has about 200 countries, which differ widely in population, income levels, political systems, GHG emissions, vulnerability to climate change, etc" (ibid., p.172).

In its defence, UCD recognises the reality of a multiplicity of societies. It recognises that the international, for the time being, consists of competing states at various levels of capitalist development. Whether ecologists like it or not, the natural world has been divided by a capitalist state system. By recognising this, UCD has a realistic and practical perspective on the current system which can be utilized to overcome ecological challenges.

The Arctic is a case in point. The indigenous people of this vast geographical area have known the impacts of external meddling on the surrounding landscape for years. The issue received particular media attention in 2016 (Vidal, 2016, Agence France-Presse, 2016, Mooney, 2016) as 'record temperatures' affected the region. The desire for oil, and ultimately profit, is exacerbating territorial rivalry over, and maltreatment of, the Arctic by state players seeking newly available resources after extensive ice melt.

Such behaviour originates from the nature of the international system where states vie for control over nature (Smith, 2008, p.61) with little regard for posterity. As Marx and Engels (1970[1845], p.53) observed: "The community… takes an independent form as the State, divorced from the real interests of individual and community." As long as private property, namely the commodification of nature, is accepted and practiced by states at an international level i.e. 'national oil reserves' and 'national territory', these capitalist entities will be pitted against each other and will continue to acquire and expand. Modern usage of sovereignty implies absolute authority on the part of the state to conduct relations (and expend natural resources within its territories) without obligation to other states or a wider community (Berki, 1980, p.102). This is a manifestation of the 'whip of external necessity'.

Capitalism, and not the state system (as realists would have it), is responsible for the pursuit of such resources. "Classes then, and not nations or states, are the basic units in history" (Berki, 1971, p.81) but states are the current level at which interests are aligned. Consequently, reform is needed to salvage the environment.

System Change

Herein lies the ecological potential of UCD. Much like the frustration experienced between Trotsky's movement for radical change and reality (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 21), the current environmental movement is suffering from an impasse. Ecological crisis may only be averted by questioning the current system (capitalism) rather than reforming within it; 'system change not climate change' (Bellamy Foster, 2018). This has been evidenced above by Marxian observations that capitalism and sustainability are incompatible.

A solution may lie within Trotsky's concept of 'permanent revolution'; revolution does not require the highest stage of

capitalism to be met after all, overcoming a key ecological criticism of Marxism as acknowledged by Barry (1999, p.271). This is more pressing than ever as climate science has shown the existence of 'tipping points' at which irreversible change is likely (Lenton et al., 2008 in Underdal, 2017, p.171).

UCD recognises the varied, rather than stagist and unilinear, development paths of capitalist states (Tansel, 2015, p.17) who construct their (combined) development with a combination of internal and external features. This holds promising implications for Marxism's place in an ecological solution as it refutes Promethean and technologically determinist criticisms. As Russia developed at such a speed by skipping industrial steps of capitalist development (Trotsky, 1932, p.9), modern states follow suit as Japan and BRICS have demonstrated. As such, the vast, ruinous expenditure of nature is not required to fulfil a marxist vision and emerging states may adopt already developed, sustainable technology (Bellamy Foster, 2015b).

Ecological crises may be especially amenable to system change due to the emergence of an 'environmental proletariat' (Bellamy Foster, 2015, p.10). Deteriorating environmental systems supposedly compel such groups to demand system change (ibid.). Marx acknowledges the conditions of downfall to be present within capitalism and a metabolic rift and destruction may provide such conditions (Smith & O'Keefe, 2006, p.32 and Barry, 1999, p.263). Capitalism is so adaptive that it has the potential to survive as a system until 'parts of the earth become unsuitable for human habitation' (Saito, 2016) so the need for change is great.

However, as has been pervasive throughout Marxist theory, the exact form this will take is unclear. Berki (1980, p.83) warns that socialist society will not necessarily be free of conflict; a world consisting of separate, socialist states with national differences and rivalries may be particularly vulnerable to this (Halliday, 1994, p.70) as shown by failed attempts at constructing socialism in one country (ibid, p.89). This may be especially so if UCD, with a potential for conflict, is transhistorical.

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated that Marx's conception of nature was ecological to its core. This rebuts critics, who often identify with the environmental movement, that claim Marxian thinking is marred by Prometheanism or a lack of sensitivity to ecological issues.

Secondly, by outlining Uneven and Combined Development and how it can be adapted to explain and address ecological challenges, I hope to have demonstrated its usefulness as a Marxian IR theory. This shows that UCD, especially with regards to the international, may be able to overcome an impasse in ecological thinking that suggests Marxian thought is not commensurate with sustainability. Such an area had been previously neglected despite O'Connor's (1989) attempt.

Overall, the need for system change is evident in order to overcome a metabolic rift and reinstate humans as species beings. While we have not yet overcome state allegiances, it is increasingly possible to discuss environmental concerns in the international under a Marxist framework. UCD recognises the reality of the current capitalist system but also shows that Marxist IR can be ecological. However, the challenge of outlining a 'post-capitalist' system that protects humanity and its balance with nature remains and a transhistorical UCD may not suffice.

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Note

[1] Ronseal: a British manufacturer of wood stain and paint known for its catchphrase: "Does exactly what it says on the tin."

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