

John Bellamy Foster's Ecological Marxism

By Dr. Frank W. Elwell

Note:

This presentation is based on the theories of John Bellamy Foster as presented in his works. A more complete summary of Foster's theories (as well as the theories of other macro-theorists) can be found in *Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*, by Frank W. Elwell. If you would like to receive a .pdf file of the chapter on him please write me at felwell@rsu.edu and put Foster.pdf in the subject line.

Nature

According to Foster the great sociological tradition, at least as it has been received from the founders, seems as if it were developed almost completely devoid of any concern for nature. It is “as if nature doesn’t matter.”

Marx and Nature

In the case of Marx, however, Foster contends that this notion is quite mistaken. By examining Marx's social ecology Foster intends to bring Marx to the serious attention of ecologists who have failed to appreciate the implications of Marxist theory for understanding the ecological crisis of our time.

Materialism and Nature

The major problem with modern ecological thought is that it is far too idealistic. Marx and Engel's ecology is rooted in their materialism, in the assumption that the natural world is the foundation for all that exists. Physical reality, according to Marx, "is independent of and prior to thought."

Materialism and Nature

“Man lives from nature, i.e. nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (Marx’s Early Writings, p. 328, cited in Foster, 2000, p. 72).



Materialism and Nature

For Marx, human beings are a part of nature; nature provides the material means of life for humans (air, water, food, sun, and shelter), as well as the tools needed to access these material needs.

Materialism and Nature

Humans relate to nature through the production of goods as well as the reproduction of species. It is through the production process that humans transform nature into products for human use. The reproduction process both assures the continuation of society as well as the regulation of the amount of resources required from the environment.

Materialism and Nature

“The first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history,” Marx and Engels write, “is that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to ‘make history.’ But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing, and various other things...”

Materialism and Nature

“The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life...”

Materialism and Nature

“...the production of life, both of one’s own in labour and of fresh life in procreation ...appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other hand as a social relation”
(Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 41–43, cited in Foster, 2000, p. 116).

Materialism and Nature

The materialism that makes life and society possible, as well as the means by which men and women manipulate the natural environment to obtain essential goods, are the foundation of Marx's social theory. These means of relating to the natural world are through production and reproduction.

Population

The ever increasing polarization of wealth in capitalist societies (both within and between nations), is a primary cause of the growth of an extensive working class as well as an “industrial reserve army” of surplus population (unemployed and underemployed) which lives in “a situation of relative impoverishment and degradation.”

Population

This industrial reserve army is necessary for the accumulation of capital in that it assures a chronic oversupply of workers on the labor market, thus keeping wages in check and allowing workers to be more fully exploited by capitalist enterprise.

The Rule of Capital

Under the rule of capital, the greater the wealth:

1. the more it becomes concentrated in the hands of a few;
2. the more extensive is the mass of workers and their productivity;
3. the larger the surplus population;
4. the more intensive is the exploitation of these masses.

The Rule of Capital

Over population in capitalist societies—defined as the portion of the population that is denied full access to the means of subsistence—is therefore caused by the rule of capital itself.

The Rule of Capital

It is Foster's contention that industrial technology and demographic factors are not the major cause of the environmental destruction around us. While certainly real, these material forces are intimately rooted in the social relations of production—that is, the institution of capital and its ever-expanding drive for accumulation.

The Rule of Capital

Consequently, demographic and technological forces are not responsive to the will of the individual; rather they are responsive to the needs and interests of capital. And the needs and interests of capital are simple: the ever greater accumulation of more capital, or more simply, profit.

The Rule of Capital

While all societies have had impact on their environments in terms of depletion and pollution, some even to the point of collapse, the problems have been localized because the societies were small. Capitalism, however, is a world-wide system with both peripheral and core nations.

The Rule of Capital

Because capitalism is based on growth, there is a drive to expand and intensify markets, to commodify all goods and services, to create new “needs” and luxuries, and to stimulate ever greater levels of consumption.

The Rule of Capital

Because of this drive, core nations have a tremendous consumption rate of raw materials and energy; within nation states—core or periphery—wealthy individuals and classes also have higher rates of consumption,

The Rule of Capital

With the expansion of population and industrial activity, Foster writes, “the scale of human economic processes began to rival the ecological cycles of the planet, opening up as never before the possibility of planet-wide ecological disaster.”

The Rule of Capital

Under the rule of capital, human societies have grown in both population and in the power of their technology. This growth has led to the ever more intensive mining of raw materials and energy from the earth and consequently to the accelerated depletion and pollution of the planet.

The Rule of Capital

Growth is not inherent in industrial production which simply consists of rational technologies and social practices to exploit the environment for human use. Rather, the commitment to economic growth stems from the nature of capitalism itself.

The Rule of Capital

The objective of capitalism is to maximize the rate of profit as quickly and efficiently as possible; it is a system of economic accumulation. A stationary capitalism, one that rejects economic growth and expansion is a contradiction in terms.

The Rule of Capital

The men who control the economic institutions in society are inextricably committed to economic growth, and through their power and influence it has become an unquestioned goal of social life.

The Rule of Capital

But serious environmental problems are not simply due to our numbers and consequent increase in consumption and waste. The type of technologies used to manufacture goods, the type of agriculture used to grow and process food, the type of transport used for goods and people are also factors in our environmental impact.

The Rule of Capital

The drive for profit has led capitalists to integrate science into the industrial production process, integration that, true to form, pays little attention to environmental consequences.

The Rule of Capital

“New technologies have replaced older ones. Synthetic detergents have replaced soap powder; synthetic fabrics have replaced clothing made out of natural fibers (such as cotton and wool); aluminum, plastics, and concrete have replaced steel and lumber; truck freight has displaced railroad freight...

The Rule of Capital

“...high-powered automobile engines have displaced the low-powered engines of the 1920s and 1930s...synthetic fertilizer has in effect displaced land in agricultural production; herbicides have displaced the cultivator; insecticides have displaced earlier forms of insect control” (Foster, 1999, p. 114).

The Rule of Capital

Since World War II, capitalism has employed science to develop a production system that is hostile to the environment, a “counter-ecological” system of production.

The Rule of Capital

Within the system of capitalism nature rarely enters into the equation. Raw materials are commodities, only their exchange values matter. The environment as a whole has little value; pollution in the production process can be carted to landfills, dissipated through smokestacks, or dumped into our oceans.

The Rule of Capital

“The profit making relation has become the sole connection between human beings and between human beings and nature. This means that while we can envision more sustainable forms of technology that would solve much of the environmental problems, the development and implementation of these technologies is blocked by the mode of production—by capitalism and capitalists...”

The Rule of Capital

“Large corporations make the major decisions about the technology we use, and the sole lens that they consider in arriving at their decisions is profitability” (Foster, 1999, pp. 123–124).

The Rule of Capital

For a more extensive discussion of the rule of capital, as well as a fuller discussion of its causes and implications for understanding human behavior, refer to *Macrosociology: the Study of Sociocultural Systems*. For an even deeper understanding of Foster's thought, read from the bibliography that follows.

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