

OUT OF DOSSIER BOOK REVIEW

Jonas van Vossolle*

The Return of Nature

by John Bellamy Foster

KEYWORDS

Eco-Marxism
Metabolism
Nature

The Return of Nature (Monthly Review Press, 2020) was the much-awaited sequel to Foster's most famous work, *Marx's Ecology* (2000). In *Marx's Ecology*, Foster presented Marx as an ecological thinker, challenging the long-standing perception of Marx as an anti-ecological philosopher whose ideas stemmed from the universality of class and a productivist understanding of economics. Drawing on Marx's Epicurean intellectual origins and his analysis of the metabolic rift, Foster offered a compelling argument that Marx's thought had always contained an ecological dimension. From this perspective, an eco-socialist worldview was the original aim of Marx's critique of capitalism.

The Return of Nature begins where *Marx's Ecology* ended—at the funerals of Marx and Darwin. It serves primarily as an intellectual history tracing the dialogue between Marxism and ecology in the decades following Marx's death. The book examines the interaction between Marx's and Darwin's main fields of inquiry—socialism and biology—and how these shaped later scientific and political thought. Written in a biographical style, Foster's narrative focuses on a selection of prominent socialist scientists—many of whom were already mentioned in the Epilogue of *Marx's Ecology*. Through their life stories, Foster explores key theoretical developments and interconnections within the emergence of a Marxist ecological worldview.

The book opens with figures directly connected to both Marx and Darwin. Particular attention is given to the Left-Darwinist zoologist E. Ray Lankester, one of only eight people present at Marx's funeral. Foster examines not only the relationship between Marx and Lankester, but also the contributions of Ray and Edwin Lankester as biologists studying the links between social conditions, pandemics, and microbiology. Another central figure in the early chapters is the Romantic Marxist William Morris, whom Foster uses to illustrate literary utopianism, the preservation of the natural countryside, and the alienation of art and labour under capitalism.

From a conceptual and theoretical perspective, the most stimulating part of *The Return of Nature* is the section on Engels's ecology, likely the core of Foster's original plan for the book as a sequel to *Marx's Ecology*. According to Foster, Engels's ecological thought is built upon three central pillars, each based on one of Engels's main works: *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845); *Dialectics of Nature* (written 1873–1886, published posthumously in 1925); and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

* Jonas Van Vossolle is a sociologist, economist and doctor in Political Science. He is an individual researcher at the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, Portugal, and co-coordinator of its Political Ecology - ECOSOC research group. His current research project - Nature and Labour - aims to understand and propose Trade Union democracy as an alternative to the Democratic and Ecological crisis of Capitalism.

The first component draws on Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. While most interpretations of this work have traditionally understood it as a study of social inequality and poverty, Foster argues convincingly that Engels's analysis also reveals a profound socio-environmental dimension. The "conditions" Engels described—urban overcrowding, poor sanitation, pollution, and the alienation of labour from its natural environment—are all deeply ecological in nature. The development of industrial capitalism in Great Britain required a reserve army of labour, triggering rapid urbanization and the abandonment of the countryside. This process led to the pauperization of the proletariat in urban and suburban slums, where people endured extremely poor housing and working conditions: cave dwellings, houses flooded by nearby rivers, open sewers spreading disease and polluting waterways, and deteriorating food quality. All these developments, in one way or another, expose the relationship between human activity and nature—between humans and space, humans and rivers, humans and pathogens, humans and plants. Engels's achievement was not only to document and critique these inhumane conditions at an early stage of industrial capitalism but also to place the development of capitalism at the centre of understanding the structural relationship between nature and society.

The second part of *The Return of Nature* concerns Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* and relates both to this unfinished work and to his *Anti-Dühring*. These represent Engels's more "mature" writings, composed toward the end of his life. He was never able to complete *Dialectics of Nature*, as following Marx's death he devoted most of his time to editing and finalizing the second and third volumes of *Capital*. *Dialectics of Nature* was Engels's response to the dominant philosophical and scientific paradigms of his time—namely, religious-teleological and mechanistic-positivist interpretations of nature. In this work, Engels sought to integrate Hegel's dialectical method (as developed in the *Logic*) with the materialist scientific revolution inaugurated by Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. According to Foster (2020), *Dialectics of Nature* represents the same kind of theoretical operation Marx had performed on political economy in *Capital*, but now applied to the natural world as a whole. Taken together, Marx's and Engels's works constitute a new, revolutionary approach to science—one that unites materialism, history, and dialectics.

Engels argued that natural relations can only be understood dialectically and historically. The relationship between nature and society is dialectical: while nature, from a materialist standpoint, clearly exists independently of human thought, humans can only perceive and interpret nature through their own cognitive faculties—which are themselves a product of nature. Hence, nature cannot be understood through shallow empiricism or abstract universalism. As Foster (2020, p. 254) observes, "Dialectical reason demands that we think about the world of nature as including both nature as external to human action and the human place within nature." At the same time, the relationship between society and nature is dynamic and constantly evolving. It changes alongside shifting systems of production and environmental conditions. Consequently, Engels's approach demands a historicization of both society and nature, whereby the so-called "eternal laws of nature" of positivist science are instead recognized as historically specific and evolving phenomena (Foster, 2020, p. 268).

For Engels, labour is the central element of human existence. As a practical activity that transforms nature in accordance with human purpose, labour serves as the mediating link between society and nature—the foundation of what Foster calls Engels's "ecological anthropology." In what would have been the concluding chapter of *Dialectics of Nature*, "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man" (often published separately), Engels argued that it was labour—the development of the hand, the use of tools, and cooperative work—rather than mere brain expansion, that drove the evolution of humanity. Labour also becomes central in Engels's later anthropological writings. Inspired by Lewis Henry Morgan, Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) contributes fundamentally to understanding the relationship between labour, property, and nature, and their implications for the position of women and the organization of reproductive work.

In the period following Engels, Foster turns his attention to the British scientific left and its engagement with Marxism and ecology, particularly around the Second International Congress on the History of Science and Technology (London, 1931). This congress, influenced by Soviet scientists under the leadership of Bukharin, became a key moment in shaping the Marxist approach to science in the twentieth century. Figures such as Joseph Needham, Lancelot Hogben, J. B. S. Haldane, Julian Huxley, J. D. Bernal, and Christopher Caudwell are central to Foster's account. He traces their political trajectories—many of them joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB)—and their roles in major historical events such as the Spanish Civil War and World War II. During this period, these Marxist scientists achieved a hegemonic position within scientific and intellectual life, one that was later undermined in the 1950s by internal divisions within the left (especially over Stalinism and the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956) and by the rise of McCarthyism during the Cold War.

Foster concludes by emphasizing that the intellectual project of the scientific left—and his own recovery of this tradition—helps reconnect the social and the ecological, two dimensions that became separated in the European left with the rise of the welfare state. He argues that in the peripheries of capitalism, these dimensions have remained inseparable: struggles for social justice and ecological survival are intertwined. The legacy of Engels and the Marxist scientific tradition, as reconstructed in *The Return of Nature*, thus provides a crucial historical foundation for rethinking socialism as an eco-socialist and care-centred project, grounded in the unity of labour, nature, and social reproduction.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

While *The Return of Nature* represents a monumental effort to recover the historical dialogue between Marxism and ecology, it ultimately reads more as a biographical reconstruction of Marxist ecology than as a Marxist analysis of ecology itself. Foster's narrative offers a compelling intellectual history of the scientists and thinkers who sought to bridge socialism and natural science, yet the book gives little sustained attention to the political economy of ecology—that is, to the ways in which nature, labour, and value function within the process of capital accumulation. The focus on individual lives and intellectual trajectories often overshadows the

structural and material dynamics of capitalism and class struggle that should, from a Marxist standpoint, constitute the foundation of any ecological critique. As a result, the book at times feels more like a collective biography of socialist scientists than an integrated analysis of the historical development of ecological materialism.

Moreover, Foster's focus remains overwhelmingly Anglocentric. The narrative rarely ventures beyond Britain, with only brief mentions of the Russian Revolution and its influence through figures such as Bukharin and the later controversies surrounding Lysenkoism. Absent are deeper engagements with the broader Marxist tradition's reflections on nature and dialectics during the same period—no meaningful discussion is given to thinkers such as Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci, or Mariátegui, all of whom made critical contributions that could help us understand the relation between nature, production, and social transformation. This limited geographical and theoretical focus narrows the horizon of what could otherwise have been a global genealogy of Marxist ecological thought.

Equally, while *The Return of Nature* briefly touches on scientific debates on eugenics and race, these discussions remain confined to the intellectual domain and neglect the ecological dimensions of colonialism, imperialism, and underdevelopment. The interconnection between the capitalist appropriation of nature and the racialized exploitation of human populations—central themes in contemporary eco-socialist and decolonial thought—is scarcely explored. Similarly, the book misses an opportunity to interrogate the ecological implications of the welfare state, particularly how post-war social democracy institutionalized an extractive relation with nature through industrial modernization and technocratic management.

Foster himself acknowledges in the introduction one of the book's major absences: the absence of women as central figures in the history of socialist ecology. Beyond scarce references to Eleanor Marx and Mary Burns, women appear largely at the margins of the narrative. More striking, however, is the lack of sustained engagement with the relationship between patriarchy, reproduction, and ecology—a field that, through Social Reproduction Theory and Marxist ecofeminism, has become central to contemporary debates on Marxism and ecology, and which traces its intellectual lineage precisely to Engels's work on the family and reproduction. Despite Engels's foundational role in linking gendered labour and the natural world, Foster devotes barely a few pages to the theme of reproduction and the politics of care within ecological thought. This omission leaves the reader with a sense that half of the historical materialist understanding of nature—its gendered and reproductive dimensions—remains unexamined.

Finally, although the book's cover invokes a "call for revolution," *The Return of Nature* offers no concrete guide for practical transformation or the development of a Marxist ecological program appropriate to the crises of the present. Foster's recovery of historical figures is undoubtedly valuable, but the narrative rarely moves from reconstruction to projection—from history to strategy. In this sense, the book ends with a gesture toward revolution without charting its material or political conditions. What remains, therefore, is an immensely rich intellectual history that revives the memory of socialist ecology but stops short of articulating how such a tradition might be mobilized today in the face of planetary ecological breakdown ■

REFERENCES

Engels, F. (1845). *The condition of the working class in England*. Progress Publishers.

Engels, F. (1878). *Herr Eugen Dühring's revolution in science (Anti-Dühring)*. Progress Publishers.

Engels, F. (1884). *The origin of the family, private property and the state*. Progress Publishers.

Engels, F. (1925). *Dialectics of nature* (W. C. A. Kerr, Trans.). Progress Publishers. (Original work written 1873–1886)

Foster, J. B. (2000). *Marx's ecology: Materialism and nature*. Monthly Review Press.

Foster, J. B. (2020). *The return of nature: Socialism and ecology*. Monthly Review Press.